

LONELY FURROW

By Maud Diver

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LONELY FURROW

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BY
MAUD DIVER

AUTHOR OF "FAR TO SEEK," "DESMOND'S DAUGHTER,"
"THE STRONG HOURS," ETC.



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TO
CONNIE

COUSIN AND FRIEND

*Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety.*

SHAKESPEARE

For all your labour, you get strength, not fruit.

E. S. BOLTON

AUTHOR'S NOTE

ALTHOUGH certain Indian incidents in my story — notably that in Chapter Five, Phase Three — are taken from life, I wish to state that all my characters are imaginary.

I append a guide to the pronunciation of certain Indian names:

Ladakh	Ladawk
Kardang	Kurdong
Gulmarg	Goolmerg
Gangabal	Gungabarl
Nanga Parbat	Nunga Purbut

M. DIVER

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LONELY FURROW

PRELUDE

LONELY FURROW

PRELUDE

I

*I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help.
Psalms of David.*

DARKNESS and a solitary horseman; the hour, nearing midnight; the figures of man and beast, sharply silhouetted, black on grey, both straining forward a little in the effort of ascent: — only a drooping sombrero needed and the tip of a scabbard jutting from under the inevitable cloak to complete the time-honoured prelude to adventure of mediæval romance. . . .

But this solitary rider of the twentieth century rode unarmed. He wore nothing more imposing than the *shikari* helmet and sheepskin coat of Northern India; and the lonely road, innocent of jovial taverns, climbed up and over the great Kailas range that divides Western Thibet from Central Asia. Inside or out, there was little of the romantic about Colonel Ian Challoner, C.S.I. — soldier-civilian of some repute on the Frontier; and less of the mediæval, beyond the prosaic detail that he was nearing middle age, and was feeling, just then, more alive to the symptoms of that incurable ailment than would nine men out of ten who had ripened under England's mellow influences or the chances and changes of military service.

And yet — the mere fact of his present occupation, at the dead end of night, was proof conclusive that there still survived in him traces of the perennial boy, inherent in most Englishmen; the boy who never quite grows up, and who remains an insoluble riddle to the very much grown-up men of more purely intellectual breeds.

Your true wanderer seeks no logical impulse to explain his vagaries; and it so happened that in more than twenty years

of strenuous Indian service, Colonel Challoner had never yet visited Ladakh — that strange region of lamas and monasteries and mulberry-coloured mountains lying between the edge of Kashmir proper and Leh, where the ceaseless stream of caravans between India and Central Asia foregather and pass on; unhurried, untroubled, by the soundless drift of centuries or the reverberate clash of a world in arms. Keen student as he was of Eastern thought and character, this particular journey had been a private dream of his for many years. But the given moment had been long in arriving. His few chances had been so persistently torpedoed, by some trivial exigency, that he had almost given up hope. Also he had married early; and the essence of the idea was — to go alone.

At the present time, he was rather conspicuously alone. It was six years since he last returned from Home in the troubled summer of 1915; and in the course of those years the difficulties of life and work in India had increased sixfold. It takes a sanguine man to go forward undismayed in an atmosphere rank with race-hatred, clouded with uncertainty in every quarter — uncertainty of tenure, of the prevailing temper in court or city or district; worse than all, uncertainty of Government support in moments of swift critical decision. And his best friend could not call Colonel Challoner a sanguine man.

Hampered financially and officially — old friendly sense of trust and coöperation almost gone — he was beset by recurrent moods of black depression, when he felt tempted to accept the sop of a proportionate pension in exchange for the eclipse of his dearest ambitions; to have done with India, whose service had been the master passion of his life; the ideal passion that asks no reward beyond intimate knowledge and unceasing toil.

But always there hovered the lurking question — Could one pull it through when one came to the point? Would it look like deserting the ship? Would it be fair to a man's wife and children at Home? At least, it would save Edyth the trouble of deciding when she intended to honour him with her company again; but a permanently narrowed margin would scarcely suit her taste. . . .

At that juncture, he usually gave it up, till next time. . . .

It was one of these moods — an acute attack — that accounted for his presence at midnight near the summit of the Kardang Pass. A restless craving to snatch a breathing-space away from Peshawur and all its works; a chance-heard scrap of talk at the Club; two months' leave temptingly available: — and he had said in his heart, "Why not?"

True, Edyth's recent letters had dwelt a little plaintively on the eternal difficulty of making ends meet; and he had promised to increase his remittance. No easy job; the 'bloated' civilian being an extinct species. Once upon a time, the cost of such an expedition would have been negligible. Coolies were coolies, then. Now, they were 'gentlemen of the road' demanding their rupee a march; liable, at any awkward moment, to 'non-co-operate' and leave the discredited Sahib ignominiously in the lurch.

So far, they had given no trouble — thanks to Faizullah, a servant of the old school, who had a way of his own with coolies. For himself, his individual ache of loneliness had been swallowed up in the immense desolation of Ladakh, as a raindrop is swallowed in the sea.

Edyth, of course, would disapprove. Senseless, selfish waste of money, would be her verdict — with John going up to Oxford in the autumn and Beryl on the ground for new frocks. Well, so be it. John would get his Oxford, and Beryl her frocks. And he would get his breathing-space into the bargain, without trying to explain to an eminently sensible wife what it meant to him — this all too brief respite from hot-weather work and hot-weather amenities, and all the jangling discords of India in transition.

Still less could he justify, to her of all people, this crowning whim of his lone adventure. For he was not the man to rest content with reaching the curious desert town of Leh, set among naked hills, twelve thousand feet up. He must needs cast an eye of longing on the great range immediately behind the city, its far-flung peaks confronting him like a challenge. Here was a chance that might never come again; a fitting finale for his pilgrimage. Nothing to be gained by it, he honestly admitted,

beyond the gain of a new experience; the fulfilling of a desire as irrational as it is irresistible to those who are so made.

On enquiry he had learnt that the Pass was just open; that, on the Leh side, it presented no peculiar difficulties, beyond a stiff pull, and a chance of mountain sickness from the abrupt ascent into rarefied air. His informant was one Captain Flower, a jovial Indian Army officer, spending three months' leave in Ladakh for the only conceivable masculine reason — sport. During his brief halt at Leh, he was installed in the Residency bungalow, by leave of his friend Captain Thorne, Commissioner of Ladakh, now on his way up for the caravan season, when the little town would be humming like a hive with cosmopolitan life.

In view of the long light evenings and 'a moon on' after twelve, Flower had counselled a night march — a common expedient at high altitudes — to avoid the blinding glare of the sun on a world of snow and the devastating wind of those high regions that blows viciously from ten o'clock till after dark. Given a reliable guide, it ought to be fairly plain sailing.

"But it'll be perishing, I warn you, sir," he had added, "and you'll be beastly uncomfortable before you reach the top — if you and the gee don't cave in halfway up. Nothing short of a forty-four-inch ibex would induce *me* to shin up any old Pass!"

By the twinkle in his bloodshot blue eye, Challoner knew the man was of those who failed to understand. But his taste in adventure was his own affair; and, undaunted by warnings, he had set out at seven, muffled in fur coat, boots, and gloves; duly escorted by the reliable guide, whose imposing array of *chits* told a more flattering tale than his unimposing features and shifty eyes.

The start, across the rising plain of the Indus Valley, had been pleasant enough: draughts of air, like iced champagne from the far snow-line; the peculiar exhilaration of ascent . . .

Then the sun had slipped out of view, though his light still lingered on outstanding peaks and hovering films of cloud; deepening to orange and rose, swelling to a crescendo of crimson, like inaudible strains of some ethereal symphony fading and dying into the night, as music dies into silence.

In the darkening sky, planets and stars gleamed like corpse candles above the pallor of the snows; and with every upward mile the cold intensified stealthily, as if some invisible hand were tightening its grasp on horse and man and the whole sleeping earth.

In this fashion he had been journeying for more than five hours; and the 'beastly, uncomfortable sensations' promised by Flower had not been spared him. The night was at its blackest, the darker for a ghostly gleam of starshine; and something seemed to have gone wrong with the moon. It was after twelve. She was due to be rising by now.

The reliable guide, who had been ambling on ahead, a shadow among shadows, had vanished round a sharp turn of the hill. It was the first time Challoner had lost sight of him.

He drew rein and called, "Is all well? Are you there?"

No answer. He rode cautiously on, round the corner.

Not a sign of the familiar shadow on the lesser dark of the frozen track. What the devil . . . ?

He flashed his electric torch between Shahzada's ears, illuminating the delicate hairs that fringed their velvet edges. The pale circle of light, deepening the surrounding dark, revealed nothing except those erect ears, one of them cocked backward, enquiring what was wrong.

Again he halted and sat listening — very erect and still — in a silence so profound that a small pulse throbbing in his temples sounded like the tremor of a distant drum.

Beyond that fantastic illusion, not the whisper of a footfall . . .

Once — twice — he shouted again, in peremptory tones — and waited . . .

Only the frail echo of his own voice came quavering back to him from the surrounding emptiness — and he knew himself alone. The presence of his sais, leisurely toiling after him, in no way mitigated that unpleasant sensation.

Either the scoundrel — after bargaining for half payment in advance — had given him the slip; or he had missed the track and fallen — goodness knew how many feet; clean gone; engulfed without a cry . . .

It was as if one had dropped a pin into the void.

"Probably half his precious *chits*¹ were faked or stolen," Challoner reflected grimly. "All the same . . . poor devil!"

A faint, uncomfortable chill trickled down his spine. Supposing he had ridden on, round that sharp curve, lost in some absorbing train of thought, it might have been a case of two pins dropped into the void — and not two pins to choose between them in the vast indifference of things.

"A narrow squeak," he coolly dismissed it, in the manner of his kind.

"The hand of Providence" would have been the verdict of an earlier day, when the individual was of more account — or believed himself so — in the mysterious workings of the universe.

His own father — a man of Spartan courage and childlike faith — had been very strong on the hand of Providence. He, himself, even as a small boy, had felt dimly sceptical of the familiar phrase; secretly puzzled by the mental picture it evoked of a gigantic Hand and Arm stretched out of the quiet sky, ceaselessly pursuing the elect, to snatch them from the brink of disaster.

He had never dared breathe a word to anyone of that irrelevant vision. But always, fatally, the phrase called up the picture: and, looking back, he often wondered how far that ludicrous trick of fancy had engendered early scepticism, and futile friction with his good old father. For, like many sons of ardent believers, Challoner's faith in the Unbeholden was so deeply tinctured with doubt as to be hardly worthy of the name. Remained hope — a fitful visitant to men of his temperament; and courage, that mercifully had not failed him yet.

But if it needed courage to go on, it needed even more to turn his back on a Pass once he had set his face to it. From the saddle he could not clearly see to follow the path; but on foot, with the help of his torch, he might manage till the moon appeared.

When his sais came up with him, he briefly explained the situation; and Jagasar, bored with the whole affair, contributed a

¹ Testimonials.

perfunctory "*Di-di*, Sahib!" When the madness of mountains came upon men, these little accidents would happen. The Presence would return? No: the Presence would walk till the moon came. Let a blanket be thrown over the horse. Further madness! But among Sahibs the disease was too common for serious consideration.

While the man obeyed orders, Challoner talked confidentially to Shahzada, soothing him with hand and voice; for it was plain, from his laboured breathing, that the good beast also had uncomfortable sensations.

In this fashion they progressed cautiously, laboriously, for about half a mile. Then mountain sickness took him again: the breathlessness, the curious depression of spirit and the stunning, explosive headache, as if, any moment, a blood vessel might burst in his brain. The foolhardy ass he was — with all those human responsibilities on his shoulders! And no earthly excuse — but the adventure of the thing, the temperament of his race. And Edyth didn't understand temperament. She packed it in one of her handy jars, and labelled it affectation . . .

Oh, confound his splitting head! And the caprices of the moon!

He came to a standstill, from sheer physical necessity; but the instant of his pulse was not purely physical.

There, at least, above the massed shadows of the east, an unmistakable glimmer — the herald of her coming.

Fascinated, relieved, he stood there, awaiting the moment that never, to certain minds, quite loses its quality of miracle.

In the utter darkness, that clear rim of light, struck sharp on the knife-edge of a distant peak, had almost the thrill of a cry: "I am here!"

The unearthly beauty of it held thought and sensation in suspense, while the thin sickle swelled and blossomed into the fuller radiance of a faintly distorted moon. A moment, she hung poised, her foot upon the mountain-top; the next she sailed free of contact, as if the earth sighing in its sleep had gently wafted her into space . . .

Imperceptibly, resistlessly, her presence invaded the darkness,

dispelling it here, intensifying it there; eerily illumining the grandeur and desolation of the heights.

Shahzada, close behind him, shook his ears and gently pawed the ground, as if aware that things had taken a more hopeful turn; and even Challoner had a moment's irrational sense of the heavens having come to his rescue. The moon's advent made progress easier — but for the misery that was on them all. He could scarcely achieve more than thirty or forty paces at a stretch; and the other two had not his incentive to persevere.

By now the ridge must be within reach. The thrill of expectation quickened his pulses; and, bidding the sais await orders, he made a cautious reconnaissance, only to find himself up against a towering ice-cliff. Its summit, revealed by the moon, curved threateningly, like an Atlantic roller in mid-career. One knew it for illusion; but the ghostly light gave it an impressive effect of actuality, heightened by reaction on his brain of the prosaic facts that he was cold and exhausted to a degree. There were biscuits and chocolate in his haversack; but even a mild bout of mountain sickness put food out of the question.

Nothing save reluctance to return impelled him to push on; and, shouting an order to his man, he pressed forward up the moonlit path — vaguely relieved to get clear of the wave-like cliff and its icy breath.

As the moon rode higher, light and more light swept, like a soundless incoming tide, over leagues of rock and snow. The infinite clarity of the air made stars and moon seem incredibly bright, the farthest peaks incredibly near. In the unearthly stillness the click, click, of Shahzada's hoofs behind him got on his nerves, like a clock ticking in the dark. It broke the eerie spell that had him in thrall.

Free among the immensities, detached utterly from the familiar round, there came over him a passing illusion of escape from the tyranny of worries, official and domestic, that buzzed like mosquitoes about his exacting conscience; but, unlike mosquitoes, could never be exultantly caught and slain. To-night he would have none of them. It was his moment. It would never come again. While it lasted, he was neither Revenue Commis-

sioner of Peshawur, nor husband of Edyth, nor father of John and Beryl, or Eve — delight of his eyes — or Tony, whom he knew only as a vociferous bundle of imperious needs, imperiously demanded — the real master of the house. He was none of these. He was himself alone . . .

And all the while the friendly click of Shahzada's hoofs behind him derided that foolish fancy.

Clear of the ice-cliff, he halted again. Sais and horse followed suit at a respectful distance. The derisive clicking ceased. He looked at his watch. A quarter to one. And he stood there debating — what next? Forward or back?

Feeling his head, and the wretched difficulty of breathing, he seated himself on a ledge of rock; drew his *poshteen* close about him and lit a cigarette.

A strange, satisfying sensation — sitting there all alone seventeen thousand feet above the sweltering plains, in a region untouched by man's restlessness, his needs, his limited sense of time. Challoner had climbed as high before now; but always with others. Now to the exhilaration of height was added the more subtle spell of solitude. It was as if some vital part of him had quietly slipped out of life; as if all the hundred and one concerns, that mattered so urgently to the husk he had shed, were of no more consequence or substance than the delusion of a dream. The eternal snows with their vast perspectives of space and time gave a man a wholesome if disconcerting sense of his own insignificance — transient flicker of life that he was in a multitude of blazing worlds.

"A thousand years in Thy sight are but as yesterday . . ." One caught a glimmer, up here, of the truth enshrined in that staggering poetic utterance, which in the far-off days of family prayers had so intrigued his budding imagination . . .

Once in a while, it happens that the dream of a lifetime comes true. Though the breadth of view he craved was lacking, this withdrawn moment of isolation between the perpetual snows of earth and the perpetual fires of heaven had been the life-dream of Ian Challoner — the essential Challoner, son of a Highland mother. For the man was a poet at heart. Always, dimly,

the dream had been there, deeply desired, yet not to be striven for, like love or ambition; simply to be waited for, in the certainty that it would come — somewhere, somehow — when the hour was ripe.

For half a lifetime it had eluded him! And now, obedient to an unplanned impulse, he was here at last . . .

Yet fulfilment brought no exhilaration. No definite thought disturbed the curious tranquillity that stole through him, stilling all the wheels of his being. The Pass forgotten, he sat there motionless, entranced, while the Immensities laid invisible hands upon his restless, seeking spirit.

Strangely, yet very clearly, there sounded in his brain the words of the Psalmist, "Be still, then, and know that I am God."

There seemed no room in him for doubt, for astonishment, even. Only in the profound quiet of earth and sky, he felt inexplicably the thrill of an inner Quiet far more profound, as if the deeps opened up within him sought and found response in immeasurable deeps without him — beyond the confines of earth, beyond the uttermost stars . . .

The sense of his surroundings slipped from him. He was still . . . he knew . . .

Next moment, surprisingly, he was himself again — cold and tired, sitting on a rock, an extinct cigarette between his fingers. . .

The thing *had* happened. It had been neither dream nor delusion: so much he could swear to. He supposed, in the nature of things, that luminous certainty would pass. Scepticism would return. It was of the fibre of his being: but no trace of it marred that vivid experience; and the after effect would not altogether fade . . .

Already, in spirit, he had dropped from the heights. But the mood of detachment was still strong upon him as his eyes mechanically followed the upward sweep of the illumined path that curved round the shoulder of the hill and vanished from sight. Still mechanically, his fancy pursued it — on and up to the unattained ridge: on, ceaselessly on, into the abode of the

Greater Gods; and yet again on — Kashgar, Andijān, Bokhara . . . 'The Golden Road to Samarkhand' . . .

The pull of it was almost physical. It stirred in him a craving he had known, in varying degrees, for the greater part of his life. Always the path that swerved from the beaten track had held for him a peculiar fascination. Yet always — goodness or badness knew why — he had been constrained to walk and work more or less in the beaten track: and, later on, when it came to leaving India the same fatal track would lie before him, unswerving, to the end of ends.

Yet, once on a time, he had dreamed, like any other ambitious youngster, that life and the world were his for the taking, malleable stuff to be moulded as he willed. Whereas it was they who had taken him and moulded him — up to a point; only up to a point. His inner man was not malleable stuff. Yet, outwardly, he had conformed. Was it some inherent weakness in himself? Or were all the young of the species victims of the same illusion — the illusion of free choice, of mastering unseen forces, which, at every turn, subtly, resistlessly, were mastering them?

And all the while his eyes followed that alluring path; his imagination pursued it . . . pursued it . . . till into his brain there crept an insidious whisper: "You have escaped from the rut. Why go back? Why not push on, turn wanderer, 'make the Golden Journey' . . . ? Drop out of your world, not in fancy but in fact. Simply disappear . . . !"

A mad idea! What the devil had come to him to-night? He even found himself, amazedly, dallying with the temptation; an Eastern would probably take it for inspiration . . .

And, after all, his work apart — how many would greatly care. . . ?

His thought sprang instinctively to Eve, the girl-child whose heart and spirit — baby though she then was — seemed so peculiarly his own.

And Edyth — nineteen years his wife?

A shock for her, of course; softened by distance and years of separation. The drop from pay to pension would hit her hard. For a time — genuinely, no doubt — she would believe herself

unhappy. But on the whole she would bear up wonderfully. He could see her, in fancy, bearing up to admiration, in faultlessly fashionable trappings of woe — very becoming to her fair skin and rather immobile type of good looks.

Suddenly, sharply, there flashed upon him a vision of her thus arrayed; a vision so disturbingly alive that, almost, it seemed he could put out a hand and touch her. Familiar details arrested him: the sweep of her straight fair lashes, the slightly prominent cheek-bones and the curve of her close-set nostril that gave to her face in repose a hint of incipient disdain. But the lips, as always, held a promise of tenderness. Their lifelike softness and serenity stirred in his veins sensations he had learnt by now to keep sternly in check. The achievement had not been a painless process; and the lonely years had given him scope for much practice. But the actual sight of her, even in fancy, set emotion tingling in him, as returning life tingles in a limb that has been half asleep. Though marriage with her had not been free of disappointments and disillusion, there remained still some element in her that held him, that moved him to rebel — strictly within himself — at the long spells of separation, which she seemed so serenely to take for granted in the interests of the children.

A moment, bewilderment unnerved him; then, deliberately, he thrust the vision from him; refused to see it; yet still remained aware of it, hovering just out of sight.

Determined to be rid of the eerie thing and its horrid implication, he shook himself awake, so to speak, as in a nightmare when things are going too far; rose briskly and drew out his watch, wondering how long he had sat there, lost to the obvious risk of freezing to death.

Not five minutes past one.

Just over a quarter of an hour since he first sat down — how many ages ago?

Time to be moving, anyway . . . Back to earth again?

He realised with a shock — half excitement, half dismay — that he had reached no definite decision. Had there, in truth, been any definite indecision? Could even the pull of that tempting fantasy prevail against the rocky elements bequeathed him by

his stern old father, against the memory of Eve and the too clear vision of that hovering tenderness on the lips of his wife?

So much for the valiant boast that man is master of his fate . . . !

Edyth had it, in spite — Well, no matter. He suspected she always would have it — at a pinch . . .

As for the lesser purpose of his journey — his hope to reach the ridge — to see morning break from that Pisgah height, over worlds he would never enter — it seemed to have lost significance, in view of the larger dream, the more magnetic pull, to which he might not yield.

True, there remained the instinctive impulse to push on; the instinctive reluctance to admit defeat . . .

But there were other reluctances to be reckoned with.

Jagasar, a few paces behind him, was ostentatiously moaning and groaning afresh in the throes of 'pass-poison'; and Shah-zada's mute misery touched him — it must be admitted — a good deal more nearly. For himself, the spirit that willed to achieve was ignominiously at the mercy of a body that refused to persist, for no adequate cause, in the face of penetrating cold, the misery of blood pressure and laboured breathing, the inability — while these symptoms lasted — of fortifying himself with food. At thirty, it might have been another story.

"Down and out," he reflected ruefully; and found no consolation in the fact that Jagasar's symptoms mysteriously abated when the order to return was given.

One more look at the moonlit path and the towering height beyond; a lingering look, as one dwells on the face of a friend one will never see again. Then he turned on his heel — and it was over.

Whether anyone greatly cared or no, whether he could achieve any microscopic fraction of good or no, there remained the 'potent, felt, interior command' . . .

Already he was in the saddle again; thankful for the promise of easier breathing farther down, his face set toward the beaten track, the haunting vision of Edyth effectually dispelled.

Queer — uncomfortably queer — the vividness of the thing. For he had from his mother a touch of Highland second-sight, whatever that eerie gift might amount to. Better think no more of it, anyway.

But thinking, or not thinking, was only half the battle. The emotions revived in him were less readily dismissed to order. Why must he be starved, year after year, of the common human need that neither work nor ambition could altogether satisfy? How if he were to tell her — about to-night? An ironical smile twitched the corner of his lips . . .

On and on, down and down; the steep drop in some ways more trying than the climb. The peculiar thrill of ascent was lacking. No spark of exhilaration in the backward journey, back to the old dead levels of hot-weather life; and all the nagging problems that up there seemed of no account.

Well — so be it. He was permanently the richer, for a dream fulfilled. The vision he sought from without had come from within; a vital experience nothing could take from him, a light nothing could quench . . .

There drifted into his mind a vagrant thought of Moses, whose face shone when he came down from the mountain. No chance conjunction, surely, but some sort of mystical significance in the old-time association of mountains with clearer spiritual vision, with closer communion between man and God. His mind wandered off irresistibly, seeking instances; Mount Sinai, Mount Pisgah, Mount of Olives . . .

They were legion, if one troubled to follow up the idea. The desert for temptation — for negation of life; the mountain for vision, communion, revealing.

If the ancients lacked scientific knowledge, they were favoured with intuitions of amazing beauty and truth. Mere superstitions? He would be a wise man who could answer that. At least, they had the breath of life in them. They survived. For all the achievements of Science — her marvels of invention and discovery — it was still to those old seers that the human spirit turned for strength and sustenance. Materialism might count a full pocket and a full stomach the true criterions of progress. A few

million unreasonable beings would still persist in the dear delusion that man cannot live by bread alone . . .

In spite of good resolutions, he was 'wool-gathering' again. Lulled by the rhythmical movement, thought and feeling became blurred. Sentences coherently begun drifted off into senseless, tailless ramblings. His grip of the reins relaxed insensibly. His head felt idiotically unstable; the weight of all the world seemed to hang on his eyelids.

Happily the good Beluch was sure-footed, like all his tribe. Times without number Challoner had slept on his back; but not coming down the Kardang Pass . . .

Paling moon and stars heralded the approach of morning. And behind him, all unnoticed, the higher peaks were rosy with the first flush of dawn. It was the hour when sleep comes even to the sleepless, overwhelms the most devoted watcher. Drowsier he grew and drowsier. His thoughts overflowed and ran together independent of his will.

But he was not asleep — he was not going to sleep. He was not asleep — he reiterated, with the blurred obstinacy of a drunkard, who insists he is not drunk. The formula itself, became a soporific . . .

Suddenly — in the very act of repeating it — he was jolted wide awake; clutched at the reins — too late; and pitched clean over Shahzada's head.

Followed the jar of violent contact; a crack — a short stab of pain — and darkness . . .

II

Rêver, c'est le bonheur; attendre, c'est la vie.

VICTOR HUGO

"A NASTY knock, Colonel Challoner. You had a narrow shave of concussion. The collar bone is a simple fracture. But, considering the jar to your neck and spine, you would be wise to wait several days before you start on trek again."

Thus Dr. Schuster, of the Moravian Mission at Leh — a big, shy man, summoned to the *dâk* bungalow by the faithful Faizullah, who had secured, as was meet, the best available bedroom for his damaged Sahib.

Faint scepticism lurked behind Challoner's rueful smile; doctors instinctively made the worst of things. Also his leave was dwindling; and his carefully mapped return journey made no allowance for this sort of undignified climax to adventure. But the fact remained that his head and shoulder hurt a good deal; and the ride back to Leh, with his arm roughly strapped by Jagasar, had been a very unpleasant experience.

"I'll be another man — after a good night's rest," he remarked hopefully.

Schuster's smile surprisingly illumined his cadaverous face.

"I doubt it, Colonel. You are lucky to have got off like this after pitching on to your head."

"Luckier still not to have broken Shahzada's knees! See how I am to-morrow. I shan't bother about getting up — officially — to-day!"

"So I thought," remarked Schuster, a humorous gleam in his eye . . .

A broken night, with severe headache and a touch of fever, reminded him feelingly that a fall, which could be lightly dismissed at thirty, must be treated with more respect at forty-three.

He woke late, to find Faizullah cautiously reconnoitring,

with *chota hazri* and letters; Larry, his two-year-old retriever, bounding on before.

Mail-day! Absorbed in his new experiences, he had actually forgotten; and he reached out for the little pile of envelopes, his eagerness tinged with apprehension. Five weeks ago he had screwed himself up to a tentative suggestion that Edyth might join him next cold weather. He awaited her answer with curiously mingled feelings. It might come any mail now . . .

One from Sir Eldred Lenox, an old friend and second cousin on his mother's side. One from Kaye, Eldred's youngest and his own godson, on leave in Kashmir. One in Eve's quaint childish hand — and a bill from his bookseller. The second week Edyth had missed. She was getting quite a good hand at overlooking mail-day. What did it amount to? His mind drifted off — early tea forgotten. Most men, he supposed, would put up some sort of protest. Perhaps he was a fool; but for him, if such things were not spontaneous, they were nothing worth . . .

“Will the Sahib open these? Or . . . ?” Faizullah respectfully proffered a paper-cutter, anxious to help without emphasising the helplessness of his master.

“Oh — good. Open them, will you?” Challoner jerked out, touched to the quick, yet vaguely on edge.

Without a word the man obeyed; handed them back neatly slit, set every item within reach, and retired to squat outside till further orders. The single-hearted allegiance of the personal native servant is an asset of Indian life that must be experienced to be understood; an asset that — like most others of its kind — is fast becoming extinct.

Challoner, left alone, emptied his first cup at a draught, and proceeded to explore his letters.

Inside Eve's envelope was a note from John — an infrequent event.

As usual, it was brief and to the point.

DEAR DAD,

I ought to have written sooner. Thanks awfully all the same for the unexpected bonus. The three pounds didn't half come in handy. Hope money's a bit easier in India. It's the deuce over here. The new car is

simply topping. Awfully good of you. We're all mad on her. Mother's very fit, and sends her love. She's rather death on a highbrow lecturer at the moment. Mugging up for the 'Varsity, I tell her!

Well, there's no more to say this time. Thanks again. So long.

Your aff. son

JOHN

If brevity were the soul of wit, John hit the mark every time. And, as a rule, it took a cheque to draw even that much out of him. True, his own letters were hardly more personal; but what chance had he been given of getting to know the boy?

A casual cheque at intervals; a surface exchange of platitudes; "your aff. son," "your affectionate Father" — that was about all it amounted to between himself and his first-born. How many Anglo-Indian fathers could tell the same tale! And, with the increased cost of living, the position was fast growing desperate. Furlough on half-pay — the civilian's one chance of long leave Home — was becoming a luxury for the moneyed few. Yet it was a man's only chance of keeping touch with his sons during the critical transition from boyhood to early manhood.

And over there they had not the haziest idea what it meant — those cheerful, complacent fathers one met on furlough, who played cricket with their boys, who had every chance to make friends with them — if they chose; and who wrote to the papers complaining that holidays were too long! Do them good to change places for a few years. But man is perverse in the grain; and — given the chance — for all he knew, he himself might start writing to the papers!

He turned to Eve's letter for antidote: Eve — a blessed baby when he left her; now unimaginably a school-girl of eleven. But with her he had made a special effort not to lose touch — with happy results.

After Eve — Kaye. Sure to be a pleasure. There had long since been established between them an affectionate intimacy such as he had conspicuously failed to achieve with his own son. But John, serenely encased in himself, had never been a promising subject. Whereas Kaye had some quality about him —

Well, he was Quita's son. And what those two words meant

for Ian Challoner was his own secret; though possibly Quita Lenox understood.

Young as he was, the boy had acquitted himself gallantly in the War. Barely nineteen when he joined the Artillery — his father's Corps — his quick intelligence, keenness, and daring had very early marked him out for rapid promotion; and before hostilities ended, he had earned his Captaincy, a Military Cross and the Legion of Honour. India — the North-West frontier — had always been his goal: and his coming, fifteen months ago, had eased appreciably the embittering sense of loneliness that had been growing on Challoner for the past few years. Admittedly, a certain fastidious apartness was ingrained in him: but to feel oneself, as life drew on, growing more and more alone in spirit was clear proof of failure somewhere; some vital secret of happiness missed . . .

But Kaye was the point; Kaye, who would not be fool enough to go missing vital secrets.

He had started his leave at Gulmarg: a Gulmarg quite other than the Arcadian glade, where Quita had camped with her babies in Eldred's Gilgit days, where Kaye himself had been born. Now, there he was back again, a bemedalled young Gunner, dancing, riding, flirting — possibly falling in love. What else could account for his impromptu shooting party, up the Sind Valley — Captain and Miss Chamier and Mrs. Bob Vane — with the Gulmarg season in full swing?

Little Miss Chamier, presumably the attraction, was one of the right sort. Her father came of good stock, and the American mother had been a Virginian — one of the old families. There was money, and a goodish bit of property. Stephen Chamier had chucked the Army and lived over there, on account of it.

Now both were gone; and their only daughter had everything. Certainly Kaye had seemed struck with her in Peshawur; but her cousin, Dick Chamier, a more likely victim, had also been in the running.

And what of Mrs. Vane — the notoriously attractive Vanessa Vane? Kaye hadn't made it quite clear where she came in.

Intrigued a little, lured right away from himself, he unfolded the boy's letter and read:

MY DEAR COLONEL,

How goes the pilgrimage? We're doing pretty well up here — thanks very much! These hills are a miracle. No adjectives need apply! Chris is a jolly good sportswoman. And of course Dick's an old campaigner. He only came along so as to back up Chris, because there was a bit of a breeze with her Aunt about our topping plan for going off on a little shoot together. Mrs. Sham — as you know — is a blooming be-nighted back-number! As if Chris and her morals wouldn't be as safe alone with me, in every sort of way, as with any old chaperon sniffing round!

I mentioned Mrs. Vane — didn't I — in my last? Well, Chris is rather gone on her — and Mrs. Sham isn't. If you ask me, she was jealous of the transfer; so she started hitting out in her best style. I don't say she isn't a good woman and all that, but it was simply cad-dish the way she slanged Mrs. Vane — behind her back, of course! Chris is my authority. I give her a wide berth. If Mrs. Vane *did* have to divorce her cad of a husband, what's there to be ashamed of? Why the devil should she go and hide her light under a bushel at Home, when she loves Kashmir, and is keen on studying Himalayan birds? Of course she's A-1, and awfully attractive, or Mrs. Sham and her crew wouldn't bother their stuffy heads about her.

Well, it's a longish tale, and one feels a bit woolly after being on the tramp in this air all day. Anyhow, we sort of guessed, Chris and I, that she was getting a bit fed up with the way Mrs. Sham carried on, when she talked of going off alone on the tramp after her birds. So we hatched our shoot picnic in the Sind Valley. Then, quite innocent-like, we asked if she wouldn't come along too, because there would be red-hot ructions if we suggested going alone. You can guess we didn't escape the ructions, because you see we'd struck the wrong kind of chaperon in our pristine innocence!

Anyway, we're quit of that now and it's simply ripping here. I'm having the time of my life. I reckon, from your dates, you should be back at Kargil in about a week. If the others are agreeable, I propose to move on that way, and join up for a bit, provided you can stick the ladies!

Bedtime now. So long. Love and salaams — the profoundest.

Yours ever

KAYE

Challoner, folding up the two sheets with his meticulous accuracy, felt a distinct glow at his heart. Did John, by any chance, write live stuff, like that, to his mother? Was it as much his own fault as the boy's . . . ?

After breakfast, over his pipe, he read Kaye's letter again; this time with a faint, disturbing prick of apprehension. *Was* Chris Chamier the attraction? Why this sudden chivalrous concern for Mrs. Vane? Had she been making a fool of the boy? She had a gift that way, from all one heard. And she must be a good ten years older, if not more. Confound the woman! Of all banal complications . . . ! Quita's son might have hit on something more original . . .

Once again he glanced through the letter, and fancied himself mistaken. Impossible to tell. But in view of that distracting suspicion, the voice of wisdom — doctor or no doctor — was a voice crying in the wilderness.

III

As one who dreaming seeth; and when the dream is gone, the passion stamped remaineth; and naught else cometh to the mind again: even such am I.

DANTE

Two days later — in defiance of a friendly protest from Dr. Schuster — Challoner was riding, at a foot's pace, through the wide main bazaar of Leh — a lean, long-limbed figure of a man, his right arm and shoulder securely strapped, his sallow skin browned by sun and wind. The hawklike eyes under very marked eye-bones had a brooding look in repose; yet they missed no detail of men or things.

At the hospitable insistence of Captain Flower, he had spent his two days in the Residency; and the good doctor had taken infinite pains over the affair of the vanished guide — without result. The smoke-screen of his shyness had lifted a little; and their parting had been of the friendliest. They had exchanged promises to meet again . . .

A little way on, the road swerved and dipped to lower levels — and so, an end of Leh. The chances were ten to one he would never see it again. But an indelible vision would remain with him of the strange desert town in its setting of rust-red hills, stamped sharply upon the great main ranges of Karakoram and Kailas; a visible sign of a hidden, spiritual landmark; a sanctuary of remembrance into which he could retreat at will, when the relentless machinery of existence threatened to shatter a man's nebulous faith in things unseen — in the fragile, unpractical lovely things, the hopes and dreams and irrational delights that alone make life worth living.

Away across the Indus Valley, another line of snows, remote, yet delicately clear, seemed upborne from earth by a range of more red hills, splashed with liquid violet shadows; and, as the road curved steadily downward, the sun began to make itself felt through the nip of morning in the air. Crossing the desert,

he reached a coveted stretch of short turf, nourished by floods; Larry, a faithful shadow, with lolling red tongue, never far behind. Grass underfoot and a slackened rein set Shahzada off at a light hand-gallop, easily distancing the modest cavalcade of camp belongings, animate and inanimate — from Faizullah, the all-indispensable, to the new rubber bath, that steamed like a saucepan at whatever unearthly hour it pleased the Sahib to strike camp.

Unsuspected by Challoner, Faizullah was keeping a discreetly watchful eye on the Englishman he had owned for fifteen years; the master whom none might cheat save himself; in whose interests he had secretly annexed certain trifles belonging to Flower Sahib that might prove useful on the march. If they were missed, let blame light on Flower Sahib's bearer, who had been careless in the matter of telling over his master's belongings before departure. He, Faizullah, always made sure that his own master's boxes held all that was his own — and sometimes, by the favour of Allah, more also — as became the confidential servant of a Burra Sahib, entirely committed to his charge.

The Memsahib had been absent longer than usual, this time: and Faizullah regarded the arrangement as a merciful dispensation, profitable to his pocket and his peace of mind. Memsahibs had a finicking way with them over trivial details of expenditure, that was galling to a man's self-respect; and if they were misguided enough to prefer the damp and chills of Balait¹ to the glories of Ind, so much the better for faithful servants.

The doctor, in his wisdom, had privately bidden him keep a watchful eye on the Sahib, who was not yet fit for long marches in the heat; but the thing must be done without undue zeal, since he was notoriously impatient of intrusion when he would be alone.

So Challoner sped on, unaware of designs upon his sacred independence; alive only to the deep-rooted, primitive satisfaction of being on the road once more.

At Spittak, where hills and river draw together, the sun was already bright on whitewashed walls and flat roofs of monastery

¹ England.

buildings perched aloft; and the clang of metal bells and the wailing of horns discordantly advertised that gods and worshippers were early astir. On a rounded ridge of sand he halted and turned in the saddle for a last vision of Leh and the mighty range beyond.

At this distance the little town, with its terraced houses, had the air of a curiously stratified outcrop, surmounted by the monastery and the towering palace of ancient kings; nine stories of massive wall, of jutting windows and balconies and carved projections: empty shell of a power that was, and is no more.

Remain the monasteries and the Indus — powers that are and ever shall be; rooted in man's elemental needs. Religion for his soul, water for his crops: — the uncomplicated Ladakhi asks little else of God or man.

"And perhaps — who knows? — he gets as near happiness as we do," Challoner reflected in chastened mood — acutely aware of his own manifold complexities and discontents, enviable product though he was of the last thing in over-civilisation.

A queer desperate business, life: staggeringly disconcerting, yet eternally intriguing; tripping a man up at every stride, yet subtly luring him on round the next corner and the next . . .

Micawbers all: secretly hoping for 'something to turn up.'

Doomed to the pursuit of that elusive hope, he gathered up his reins again — and cantered on . . .

Following the sweep of the Indus — blue as the sea under a southwest wind — he headed for a nullah, where trees and running water invited him to halt, for lunch, beside the purling stream. Thereafter, he gave orders to push on, ignoring broad hints from Faizullah that trees and water were God's best gifts to the traveller; that the afternoon sun would be hot as hell in the valley, bad for man and beast.

Challoner heard him out, while deliberately filling his pipe. "When I have finished this," he said, "we start. It is an order."

"*Hazûr.*"

Faizullah accepted with unmoved countenance the obduracy of the Sahib and the decree of Fate.

Challoner settled down comfortably to an irreproachable cup

of coffee — his particular weakness, which would have appeared without fail, whether he encamped in a waterless desert or on ice-bound heights. The grass was cool and moist. The murmur of running water was like music in his ears — the music of an English stream.

He closed his sun-wearied eyes and settled his aching shoulder against a tilted rock.

A luxury of weariness stole through him. An exquisite illusion of England in early summer mistily blurred his brain; and before the pipe was half smoked, it dropped from between his teeth. His head lolled against the rock. He fell sound asleep . . .

Faizullah, arriving to report, wagged a sagacious beard. Here was ocular proof of the doctor's wisdom, not to mention his own. Praise Allah, the weakness of the flesh did occasionally curb the inhuman energy of Sahibs.

Straightway he countermanded the order to start. The Presence slept and must not be disturbed.

Returning to the spot, he stood looking down at his unconscious master with a very real mingling of affection and concern. Then his eye caught a gleam in the grass — Challoner's whiskey flask. This rainless air made a man's throat dry as parched grain. Allah — having put temptation in his way — would surely condone.

Very cautiously, lest the dog awake, he picked up the flask and unscrewed it; poured a measure of spirit into his drinking vessel; diluted it gingerly and swallowed it in one gulp. Then, at a respectful distance, he too settled down in the shade, removed his turban, without displacing a fold — and slept.

Challoner was dreaming of England: — a country lane on a June evening; a tawny yellow moon low in the sky; the smell of dust and hawthorn and a far-off whiff of meadow-sweet in his nostrils; in his ears the sleepy trill and twitter of birds settling to rest . . .

Not far ahead of him, a woman walked alone. The lines of the figure recalled his wife. More supple, more graceful than he remembered; but herself — not a doubt. It seemed he had come Home on impulse, without warning, to give them all a surprise:

and she — hurrying home, intent on the children — hadn't an idea!

An almost boyish elation set him wondering — “*Am I myself — or another?*”

No answer: no thought of an answer. The whole thing was — and was not, like a breath on glass.

Quietly, swiftly, as one only can in a dream, he caught her up, slipped his arms round her from behind, whispered hurriedly: “Don't be frightened, dear, — it's Ian.”

With a muffled exclamation, she turned; the moon full on her face —

And it was not Edyth!

It was a face he knew — yet did not know. It struck some exquisite, familiar chord of memory; and at sight of it fire ran in his veins.

His dream self — if it was himself — knew no hampering inhibitions. Edyth dropped clean out of his mind.

“*You!*” he cried under his breath, without a glimmering idea who ‘You’ might be; and passionately tightened his hold.

For one rapturous moment, she yielded; then, suddenly strained away from him, with never a word. Her delicate strength seemed superhuman; and the pang of disappointment, of his thwarted craving, woke him outright, with a crick in his neck.

So vivid, so disturbing were his dream sensations that it took him a second or two to realise where he was and what had happened. Awake, he felt vaguely ashamed of himself; the more so, that his shame was a pallid thing compared with the inadmissible thrill — part discovery, part recognition — of what, of whom — ?

His awakened eyes lit upon the slumbering Faizullah — bearded, eagle-beaked, unturbaned, and snoring lustily; a double bass accompaniment to the murmuring stream.

The proper scoundrel — !

He whipped out his watch. Ten to four. It would take nearly five hours, steady going, to reach Bazgu, his stopping-place for the night.

He sprang up, dreams dispelled; and gently stirred the Pathan with his foot.

“Wake up, son of sloth! Is *this* the way you obey orders?”

Faizullah snorted, grabbed instinctively at his turban, and confronted his master; all his wits about him, fluent excuses on his lips. How should this slave venture to disturb the Presence? Moreover, the Doctor Sahib had bade him beware of the midday sun in this accursed country. Obedient to the Sahib’s wishes he had come to report; but there were no orders as to waking —

Challoner smiled his crooked, half-reluctant smile, that Faizullah knew for a fair-weather sign. His plausible tongue had saved him.

But there were urgent orders now: orders that were briskly obeyed; and Challoner set out again, refreshed in mind and body; though still intrigued a little by that curiously perturbing dream. The clash of emotions it had stirred in him did not readily subside.

Shahzada, rested also, took the road again with a will: — mile on mile of wild, exhilarating country: stony desert underfoot; and on either hand granite ranges, naked as truth, thrust great rock arms down to the river. Every turn revealed some new grouping of far hills, incredibly blue: and all the light-filled air of the valley shimmered with dust of gold, that haloed distant figures of wandering Ladakhis, or red and yellow lamas, twirling the indispensable prayer-wheel that keeps a man automatically in touch with heaven, while his thoughts remain below.

No shade; no green; no moisture anywhere. The sun’s rays smote viciously upon his back and shoulders, causing him to bless Faizullah’s discreet evasion of orders. And mere heat was aggravated by the intolerably dry, rarefied air of these high desert regions that register barely three inches of rain in the year.

He was not sorry when the road swerved through a narrow side valley back to the river and fields of young corn, flanked with interminable *mani* walls,¹ every flat stone of them graven with the mystic formula, *Om mani padmi hum*. (O God of the

¹ Prayer walls.

jewel in the lotus!) Throughout the whole lama-haunted region of Ladakh, those four words, in unending repetition, fluttered on prayer-flags, circled within prayer-wheels and huge prayer-cylinders worked by water-mills. They were graven on temples and sacred figures and stones to the million millionth; and the traveller who was careful to leave these mounds of grace upon his right side received their blessings automatically, whatever his individual deserts.

“God knows I have need of any spiritual benefit that’s going,” Challoner mused, with a private chuckle at his own folly, as he punctiliously guided Shahzada along the right sides of those magical walls. For, at heart, he was endlessly tolerant of all the pathetic absurdities and vagaries that spring from man’s instinctive pursuit of the Unseen.

He camped that night outside the curious village of Bazgu; its crude brick houses and shrines set among cliffs lavishly splashed with blues and purples, reds and raw sienna; as if some titanic Futurist had been indulging in an orgy of ‘robust colour’ when the mountains of Ladakh were on the easel of God. And by four of the morning, he was in the saddle again, climbing out of the hollow into spacious desert country. Shahzada was off duty; and Zaidée fresh as a bird; a graceful creature, half Waler, half Arab, her paces as easy as the rise and fall of a boat on a summer sea.

At Saspul he halted for lunch and a rest: then forward again, by zigzags and rock ledges and scaffolded paths, past countless wayside temples, set aloft on peaks and ridges; as much a part of the landscape as the Indus itself, and the vivid splashes of colour that enlivened the desolate hills.

At Nurla, clean rooms in the *serai*, untenanted by the formidable flea of Central Asia, tempted Challoner to desert his tent. But between an access of comfort and an access of over-fatigue, he lay wide awake till three in the morning; the misery of it aggravated by pain in his shoulder, by a rising temperature and throbbing nerves that beat a devil’s tattoo in his brain.

Though anxiety nagged at his heart, the unanswerable ar-

gument of fever constrained him to a halt of forty-eight hours, while he and Faizullah fought the fiend with heroic doses of quinine.

It was during this halt that he first noticed a certain silver pepper-mill and a porous butter-cooler that were strangers to his memory.

Knowing his Faizullah, he remarked, casually, "Very neat, that. Do they make butter-coolers in Nurla, Sirdar-ji? And a pepper-mill also? Good hunting!"

But to catch Faizullah's wits asleep was not often given to a mere Sahib.

"Surely the Presence forgets?" he queried, to gain time, letting the sarcasm slither off him like water off a greasy dishcloth.

"Not at all. The Presence remembers them both very well — at the Residency."

Challoner's tone was still suave, but it pricked the Pathan's apology for a conscience.

"*Wah! Wah!* Your Honour speaks truth. Flower Sahib's bearer was too careless of his master's goods. But when there is confusion of departure, such little mistakes will arise. And I, having left the pepper-mill at Peshawur —"

"Bad shot, Faizullah! The other man's bearer won't work this time." Challoner's finger indicated the initials "H. T." graven on the mill. "That belongs to my friend Thorne Sahib, Commissioner of this country. I go to join camp with him at Kargil. Shameful talk that I should eat his salt, while carrying off his private property from Leh."

Faizullah feared that tone; it played unpleasant tricks with the small bones of his spine. Beneath its deceptive quiet, lightnings slumbered — as he had good reason to know. Hands set palm to palm, he bowed his turbaned head; outwardly contrite, inwardly marshalling plausible evasions.

"Your Honour speaks truth. The carelessness was mine. Through concern for the Sahib's health, I failed to overlook the packing of the kitchen box by that thieving magpie Naryan Das — may his liver turn to water! *Hazûr* — consider" — he hesitated, the fraction of a second — "for the honour of the Sahib's

household, were it not better that these trifles be mislaid upon the march? The matter can be arranged."

Challoner's left eyebrow twitched. "Which is to say you would doubtless redeem your carelessness by driving a hard bargain with the first Ladakhi who covets them? I have lived eighteen years on the Border, Faizullah, and you have lived many years among Sahibs; but it seems I have learnt more about your people than you have learnt about mine. For the honour of my household, I take over these trifles myself."

Very deliberately he pocketed the pepper-mill and proceeded to empty the butter-cooler. "Thorne Sahib, having been fourteen years in India," he added conversationally, "is doubtless familiar with the zeal of a faithful bearer-*lōg*."

"*Hazūr*," Faizullah agreed with unshakeable gravity.

A second obeisance, a little lower than the first — and he withdrew; his spinal sensations relieved; his overweening conceit rasped a little, because he, Faizullah Khan, had for once been worsted by an awkward situation and the infernal coolness of the Sahib.

But if the annoying mischance in no way disturbed his devotion to the Englishman, whose tongue could be as a red chili, it left him sore enough to vent his spleen on others. Naryan Das — an honest, poor-spirited creature — quavered under dark hints of dismissal for a theft he had never committed; and the coolies on the next day's march wondered apathetically what sins they had committed in a former life that the Sirdar Sahib should deal so ruthlessly with the features and the honour of all their female relations.

Challoner, hearing from afar the distant thunder of Faizullah's chest notes, chuckled to think how Thorne would relish the tale of his misdirected zeal. Shrewd insight and a strong sense of race saved him from the common error of judging Orientals by Western standards. He could see the whole thing through the other man's eyes. Freshly ground pepper was one of his own minor weaknesses. There had been trouble over that forgotten mill. What bearer worth his salt — or his pepper — could resist the chance of making good at another Sahib's expense?

He had started earlier than usual, with a double break in view. The short bout of fever had left him ridiculously shaky; but the collar bone seemed to be mending rapidly. There was ecstasy in the air of pristine morning, in the rush and swirl of the river, deepening and widening to a long placid reach, between slopes of metallic green *débris*. And on either hand the abiding desolation of the hills loomed mistily purple and red, against the palpitating blue of dawn.

A welcome halt for breakfast, on the hither side of the wooden bridge over the Indus; a pipe and a lazy half-hour lounging at ease, in the shadow of a rock, where the sharp tang of night still lingered.

The charm of the place and the hour stirred in him a vague desire for companionship, the true companionship of 'like in difference'; a craving most poignantly felt by sensitive men of character and imagination, for whom the sex relation is secondary to the rarer, more exacting relation of the spirit. Being human, and hungry for the fulness of life, he craved both; and for many years, now, he had been constrained to do without either.

A curious state of life — matrimony. Yet — by God! if a man had the luck, or the discernment, to win a wife with whom he could enjoy to the full these leisurely wanderings in the wilds of earth — !

That unorthodox explosion pulled him up short. What the devil had come to him? Fever — or that fool of a dream? The after-sense of it persisted strangely. He ought to be properly ashamed of himself. Better canter on and blow away cobwebs. No antidote like the saddle: and the feel of a good horse between one's knees.

While a guard from the ramshackle fort by the bridge saw Faizullah and his impedimenta across the river, Challoner cantered on and on, up the valley; the sun's rays increasingly fierce, the mountains increasingly rugged and barren, as they closed in toward the gorge of sharply carven cliffs below Lama Yoru.

Riding through it in the morning, on his outward journey, the

effect had been sublime — he remembered — to the point of pain; an effect one could not hope to recapture in the so different atmosphere of early evening.

Impossibility of recapture, of drinking twice at the same spring, ran like a refrain through all the days of his backward journey. Though the scenes were identical, his inner response to them was changed utterly. Gone was the glamour of novelty, the keen exhilaration of setting out, unshackled, into unknown regions, to unknown ends — the very essence of adventure. No speculation now; no curious, eager pressing on from point to point. Reality had him again in its ruthless grip.

He entered the gorge alone, miles ahead of his contingent and his sais. The trough was already in deep shadow; the river, a pallid, hurrying wraith of unrest, twisting and turning like a trapped thing seeking a way of escape. And high above, at every angle of the unrailed path, level sunbeams were gilding and grazing the edges of slopes and jutting cliffs with a sharp Rembrandtesque effect of light and shade. No vestige of colour anywhere but the unutterable blue of the sky.

And as the stark heights closed in on him, the stillness and emptiness intensified by the ceaseless roar of the river, there stole through him an eerie sense of passing out of life — out of the world. Mere morbid fantasy, was it? Or a chill of premonition?

Br-r-r! He shook himself physically, and urged Shahzada to a trot, heedless of sharp corners and abrupt descents to the swirling river. Then, because undue haste looked like running away, he slackened speed; and, for the remaining miles, pinned his thoughts resolutely to mundane affairs.

PHASE ONE
APART

PHASE ONE

APART

CHAPTER ONE

If it be not now, it is to come . . .

SHAKESPEARE

EARLY afternoon, three days' march from Lama Yoru, found Challoner cantering across the barren plateau above Kargil — the beginning of the end.

The broad rolling country, the mulberry-coloured hills, and the noble peak in the south, recalled, with a faint pang, his earlier sensations on the outward journey; the stirring knowledge that all Asia lay before him; the incipient craving — germ of his later impulse — to go on and on, world without end; to shed all sense of time and sense of duty, those twin fetters clamped upon the adventuring soul of man.

Yet here he was back again, obedient to the Call of the Tame; and there below him lay Kargil — orchards and river, fort and bridge and huge lacustrine terraces, jutting out like railway embankments, all saturate with the mellow afternoon light.

Dipping downward from the plateau, details emerged. And there, where apple orchards had blushed on his upward journey, an eruption of dingy-looking toadstools marked the position of Thorne's camp: Thorne — and the others . . .

A note from Kaye had caught him at Lama Yoru, announcing his date of arrival at Kargil — ladies and all. And for one ignominious moment, Challoner had felt tempted to trump up some plausible excuse and change his route back to Kashmir.

Now, within actual sight of the tents, a fresh access of shyness seized him; a vague reluctance to go forward.

He dismissed it, with a touch of annoyance.

In another moment, it was forgotten. He had sighted a rider crossing the bridge below him; unmistakably an Englishman;

and — unmistakably Kaye. Whatever indiscretions he might have been up to, it was good to see the boy again.

A little above the Fort, they met and greeted.

“Good Lord, Colonel!” cried Kaye, at sight of the strapped arm and shoulder. “What’s the damage?”

“Collar bone,” Challoner informed him briefly. But Kaye considered himself entitled to details, and Challoner told his tale — an abridged version — as they rode along. It gave him a chance to take stock of the boy, while his attention was engaged elsewhere.

To Challoner’s eyes, some turn of head or tilt of chin made him look more like his mother than usual. The essence of her spirit was in him — her intuition and humour; her fine pliability, as of tempered steel. In the more obvious externals, he was a Lenox, true to type. It needed scant scrutiny to see clearly what had come to him; though no doubt he flattered himself he was skilfully hiding his secret from the uncomprehending eyes of middle age.

Nearing the camp, they sighted Captain Thorne, a large, genial being, enmeshed in the flowery leave-taking of some local magnate, whose negligible person was obliterated by a vast turban and an embroidered coat several sizes too big for him.

“Good old Thorne — capping compliments, and not budging an inch. He’s the man for these people.” Challoner glanced sidelong at Kaye, who was looking hopefully elsewhere. “What’s it you’re after? The ladies?”

A palpable hit. Kaye achieved the nearest thing to a blush that chronic sunburn would allow.

“Oh, well . . . I was only wondering —”

“So I saw. They’ll make you wonder a good bit more — before you’ve done with ’em.”

A view-haloo from Thorne — who was tactfully manœuvring his visitor to the ‘edge of the carpet’ — saved Kaye from a futile attempt to answer the unanswerable.

Challoner responded by quickening his pace; and Kaye thankfully followed suit.

“Colonel Sahib *ki jai!*¹ I’m quit of the beggar at last — thanks to you!” Thorne greeted them with his big rumble of a laugh. “But you don’t look near as fit as you should, after six weeks up here. Not broken your arm, I hope?”

His deep, deliberate voice had a restful quality that matched the effect of lazy power written all over him. The blare of the last trump would not avail to hustle Havelock Thorne. By virtue of a long family tradition, he had India, so to speak, in his blood, and England securely hidden in his heart. Decidedly the right peg in the right hole.

Challoner, in his detached fashion, was thinking these things while he repeated the tale of the collar bone — still further abridged; and Kaye, stood by, feeding his Kabuli pony with lumps of sugar, still wondering . . . but determined not to ask, with the Colonel in that vein.

“Been overdoing it a bit,” Thorne commented sagely. It was an indiscretion that could never be laid to his charge. “You let ‘our Dr. Norman’ overhaul you before you descend into Hell. He’s arriving to-morrow. Coming along my way to look up Mission converts.”

“I’m not a Mission convert!”

Thorne rumbled genially, “You never can tell! Meantime, who said ‘pegs’?”

He shouted for drinks. The horses were led away; and Thorne motioned his guests to the camp-chairs set out under a lordly chenar tree.

“Your ladies are indefatigable, Lenox,” said he. “They went off riding, on a tour of inspection. I sent my orderly with them, as I was in the toils.”

“Been gone long?” asked Kaye, avoiding the Colonel’s eye.

“Soon after you left. Stay and have a drink, won’t you?”

“Thanks, no,” said the devout lover — and sauntered away, leaving the older men to their pegs and cheroots, their talk of *zemindars* and *tehsildars* and land settlements; of petty governors, exactions, and intrigues; of the people themselves — the inarticulate, long-suffering creatures of the soil, in whose inter-

¹ Victory to the Colonel Sahib!

ests both men battled, year after year, against Oriental callousness and a *babu*-ised British Government; most often with disheartening results.

Thorne laboured in a field less industriously sown with tares than did Challoner in the turbulent district of Peshawur. He dealt with Oriental officialdom naked and unashamed; a trifling matter of a few centuries removed from the English-speaking, English-spurning offspring of an educational machine that grinds out potential clerks by the thousand, in place of actual men. True, the twin States of Kashmir and Jammu had progressed notably under a strong, sane ruler, ably served by picked Government officers, British and Indian. But the smaller fry among Governors and Wazirs — barely emergent from the Middle Ages — still favoured the immemorial methods of their great-grandfathers before them; and the petty officials of Thorne's outlying kingdom had little of the modern enlightenment, still less of modern scruple, in dealing with their own. It was he, the alien — symbol of a 'Satanic Government' — who must exercise all his prestige and tact to ease the yoke of a people not his own; fully alive, all the while, to the humour of the thing; and carrying it through none the less thoroughly for that.

Unmarried, and a good deal isolated during the summer months, his main interests had gradually narrowed down to sport and his job, and a desultory study of modern history to keep his brain from rusting. At the moment his job was to the fore — the threatened grain shortage in Kargil, the humours and distractions of the caravan season at Leh; and he thoroughly enjoyed talking things over with a man whom he could rely on not to be 'bored stiff' with it all. For, though Challoner's acquaintance with Ladakh had been unavoidably postponed, he knew his Kashmir and its guardian heights with the threefold intimacy of a lover and a sportsman and a linguist. After more than a week of his own company, it was a luxury of refreshment to lounge at ease under the great chenar,¹ in the cool of evening, smoking and drinking and discussing purely impersonal affairs with his very good friend, Havelock Thorne.

¹ Plane tree.

And while they talked, the detached half of his mind was delighting in the flute-like call of a golden oriole to its mate, the plash and gurgle of the stream below the camp, the play of light and shadow on the near hills, receding to purple distances, such as only mountains can achieve.

The meadow, on their right, was fully occupied with the Commissioner's camp: an accommodating array of tents that sprang up or vanished, at command, like Jonah's gourd: double-fly living tent and office tent, with flaps flung wide to the evening air; sleeping tents of the party; and away behind these, decorously aloof, *shuldaris*¹ for servants and followers, tethered ponies and horses tossing nose-bags as they neared the end of their evening meal; a score or so of natives, squatting about in groups, chattering, haranguing, and expectorating with skill and precision; whiffs of wood smoke from the region where Nur Bux — cook and *khansamah* — was conjuring a five-course dinner from a few local fowls, certain indispensable tins and bottles, and an impromptu mud oven.

Smells, sights, and sounds, trivial enough; yet they make up the sum of camp life, with all it means to your true wanderer of movement and freedom, of living close to the heart of Nature, taking with equal thanks her rough and friendly moods. The spell it puts upon certain men works like madness in the blood; and Challoner, steeped in the peace of its pleasantest hour, felt, at the back of his mind, a foretaste of the nether fires — the stifling, well-ordered bungalow, the office rank with perspiring humanity, that awaited him down there in Peshawur. Implacable, inescapable; but — not just yet, thank God.

This habitual undercurrent of thought in no way hindered him from listening intelligently to Thorne's tale of his narrow escape from the infliction of a wandering M.P., whose zeal for sampling the trip to Leh had mercifully evaporated at the eleventh hour.

"Luck for us all," he grunted in sympathy. Even the undesired feminine element was preferable to the indiscriminate zeal of your question-hunting M.P. "They're becoming a positive

¹ Native tents.

epidemic. It's the curse of modern India. Westminster is too much with us. They feed us on a sterilised diet of files and councils. They chastise us with scorpions of red tape. Then they rate us for losing touch with the people. Bless their innocent hearts!"

Thorne picked up a pocket edition of Captain Trotter's 'John Nicholson' that lay on a table at his elbow. "I've just been browsing on this again for want of fresh stuff, also the letters of my maternal ancestor. *Some* reading! 'There were giants in those days.' And if they had to pull along without our highly civilised advantages, they enjoyed some jolly fine compensations. They *counted*: they got their chance."

"They were *men*," Challoner interposed with bitter emphasis. "They could leave their mark on a province; do creative work — up to their lights. You and I, my good Thorne, are no more than efficient nuts and cogs in a highly centralised machine."

"'Oh — h — what a happy land is India!'" chanted Thorne, pensively thrumming an invisible banjo.

"In this particular spot, at this particular moment — it is Elysium," Challoner muttered, lying back at ease, a cigar between his teeth; his helmet discarded, revealing an odd iron-grey streak in his thick dark hair.

His half-closed eyes, scanning the scene, became aware of approaching silhouettes on horseback. It was as if his mere confession of contentment had touched some hidden spring that shattered it.

"Exit Elysium," he remarked in a tone carefully emptied of expression.

Thorne flung him an amused glance.

"Getting as bad as that, is it? *Hul-lo!* Do my eyes deceive me? They went forth three — they return, four. Blest if it isn't young Lenox! Must have got at the way they'd gone from my peon. *What* a boy!"

Challoner said nothing. He was divided between unreasoning annoyance with Kaye and an instinctive recoil from those approaching horsewomen that amounted to stage fright. He felt dusty, unkempt, and tired. But he knew precisely what those plausible excuses were worth; knew very well that he simply

funked 'that infernal woman' who had cast her spell over Kaye. As for Kaye, the young ass, instead of exercising rudimentary self-control, he seemed to be giving himself away with both hands.

"Kaye's energy is immense," he remarked, dragging himself out of the chair, where he had counted on lounging for another half-hour. "With the arrogance of youth he probably imagined the women weren't safe without him! I'll be getting along, and make myself presentable —"

Thorne surveyed with lazy amusement the well-worn, well-cut coat and breeches, the man's invincible air of distinction that would have redeemed the outfit of a coal-heaver.

"You don't fool *me* that way, Colonel!"

"Very well. In plain English, I'm off. Petticoats are not my strong suit. When d'you feed?"

"Seven-thirty. They're keen on bridge after; and I like to keep early hours in camp. Mrs. Vane's a rare good player. Don't you know her?"

"Only by hearsay. D' you?"

"I've met her here and there. It's always a pleasure. She's out of the common run. And she's ripping to look at."

"None too safe to fool round with, I gather," Challoner remarked crisply.

"Not having tried, can't say! Still — I fancy a man 'ud feel safer with Miss Chamier. One of the best. And a goodish bit of money, I hear."

Challoner's mouth twitched.

"I suppose that's the first thing every man hears about her — and it's least of her virtues. *I* wouldn't be a girl with money out here. The men are all so damned poor, so dead sick of juggling with two ends that never meet. Are you seriously on the war-path? Had enough of single blessedness?"

Thorne pulled pensively at his pipe.

"Oh, well . . . you meet a jolly little girl like that . . . and it kind of comes over you that you're getting on a bit. You've a decent screw and a decent climate, and singleness — if it's ever so blessed — is rather a lonely job, at times —"

"'M! Life's rather a lonely job at times — in any state of being," Challoner mused absently, his eyes on the approaching riders. He was not going to be caught, if he knew it.

As he stooped to collect his whip and helmet, they were nearing the orchard. They could distinctly see and be seen.

Thorne sat forward, protesting.

"Hang it all, Colonel! They'll guess you're bolting."

"You don't fool *me* that way!" Challoner retorted with his twinkle; and, adjusting his helmet, he strolled leisurely off towards the lines. But at heart he knew he was abjectly bolting from an unknown woman, from a difficult moment, that he had no wish to tackle at a disadvantage.

The cold truth was, he had obeyed an instinctive impulse to escape . . . from God knows what, or whom: an ignominious sensation that — even in the act of obeying it — he contemptuously ignored.

CHAPTER TWO

This is the sort of thing that really begets a personal feeling against Nature.

R. L. S.

FOR all Faizullah's tact and skill, changing clothes was still an irksome process. Challoner was only half through with it — his thoughts very much astray — when they were interrupted by a violent agitation of the outer tent flaps, like a flutter of monstrous wings, the significance of which he knew too well. One of the sudden, swift gales of that otherwise peaceful region was careering down the valley at the rate of an express train.

It was, normally, a brief infliction; but — while it lasted . . . !

Crash! Over went his camp washing-stand, brass jug and basin, their contents flooding the felt *numdah* and, incidentally, his patent-leather shoes; he being still in his slippers. The whole tent, around and above him, was flapping and billowing like a mad thing.

By ill luck, he chanced to be alone, vexatiously unable to tackle collar and tie without help. But at least he could hang on, with his sound arm, to one of the loosened poles, in the hope of averting total collapse, and pray for Faizullah's return.

Outside was pandemonium let loose; yellings and crashings; hammering in of tent pegs, neighing of startled horses, thud of scampering hooves; and through all, dominating all — crescendo, prestissimo — the whistling, blustering fury of the wind.

Useless to shout. He could only cling affectionately to his pole; and watch, with detached interest, the antics of his *numdah*, that was flapping, like a flatfish newly caught.

From the farther pole — that looked suspiciously groggy — his hanging camp mirror flapped in sympathy. Instinctively, he sprang across to save it. But the perverse thing eluded him; crashed on to the brass jug and contributed a shower of splinters to the lively proceedings.

“Seven years' bad luck,” whispered the primitive Challoner

at the roots of his being; and — reason or no — the trivial accident seemed to take the guilt off the humours of the gale.

Viciously kicking aside the slaughtered mirror, he recaptured his pole. The tent must have been carelessly pitched. Camp life, at that particular moment, was no Elysium . . .

At last, yellings and shoutings were surging his way. In point of fact, it was barely three minutes since the storm burst; but three minutes can seem an eternity, as everyone knows who has tried to boil an egg in a hurry. If only the crazy thing would hold out . . .

Not a bit of it. For all his valiant efforts, the unsupported pole lurched drunkenly and collapsed sideways . . .

Next moment he was battling with the liveliest things in shrouds that ever enveloped mortal man. The stuffy, smelling canvas buffeted his face, flapped and lapped him round; and — with the positive malignity of inanimate things — seemed to be fiendishly enjoying his discomfiture.

In the thick of the struggle, Kaye's voice reached him:

"Hang on, Colonel! We've got her!"

And he hung on, inside; while chanting coolies hung on outside; till the drunken pole gradually righted itself and he was a free man again.

The wind seemed a shade less boisterous now; but the loose canvas was still billowing vigorously, when the tent flaps were pulled apart and Kaye looked in; sympathetic, as to Challoner, but patently enjoying the racket.

"Nip out, Colonel, while they make her taut again." (He took in the scene at a glance.) "A hell of a mess! And you not dressed? Hurry up! Any old coat — that damned pole's coming down again!"

The last spurred Challoner to action. He had not the remotest desire to be re-ënfolded in the fond embraces of his tent.

Snatching up his Norfolk jacket, he hurried out, as Kaye dashed in and secured the wavering pole, shouting, "*Kencho — kencho-o!*"¹ with all his lungs.

¹ Pull — pull.

Just outside, Challoner almost ran into Faizullah; a Faizullah so wind-driven and dismayed, that he had not the heart to launch thunderbolts. He contented himself with a shot of sarcasm.

“Oh, you *pukka bundobast-wallah!*¹ Clear up the mess in there, *ek dum!* I want to finish dressing for dinner.”

“*Hazúr*, have mercy!” The penitent’s profound salaam was marred by a playful gust that whisked the skirts of his coat over his head, and almost sent him sprawling. The hurricane had no respect for outraged Commissioner Sahibs. Breathless and battered, he stood upright. “The *tofán*² came on in a moment like ten thousand devils. And hastening to return, I stumbled over an accursed rope — ”

“Well, get in now, and help Lenox Sahib. No time for tales!” Faizullah’s eye was on the Norfolk jacket.

“But the Presence has the wrong coat.”

“No matter! It will keep out the wind.” He waved aside an offer of help. “Your job’s in there. I can manage!”

The boast brought swift retribution. He thrust an arm into the left sleeve, only to find the unattached remnant whisked gaily aloft; the empty sleeve cuffing him over the head, blinding him and making him curse audibly.

Swinging round to get his back to the wind, he felt his coat grasped from behind; the vexatious fluttering stilled.

“*Ach-cha! Teek.*³ Now, go,” he said in Hindustani, securing the elusive thing, and buttoning it across his bandaged shoulder and arm.

“He’s gone. He didn’t *dare* disobey!” said a woman’s voice startlingly close behind him.

There was laughter in it; and frank laughter in the eyes that smiled at him, when he turned on his heel and confronted her; in a tingling embarrassment, ungraciously mute. The antics of his coat were as nothing to the intrusion of this inopportune woman, who appeared to be relishing the joke.

Tall and invincibly assured, she stood there, still smiling at him, not unbecomingly discomposed by the wind — her long soft

¹ Excellent organiser.

² Gale.

³ Good. That’s right.

cloak all aflutter on one side; on the other side, clinging close as the rind of a fruit; revealing, from shoulder to ankle, the gracious lines and curves of her figure.

Her head was shrouded in a motor hood, the colour of an evening primrose. From the back long pennons streamed sideways. In front, it demurely circled her face. Not a stray rebellious hair to be seen; only a pair of oblique eyebrows, a nose delicately arrogant, a long, sensitive mouth, and those cool, critically smiling eyes; eyes, that, under cover of amusement, were doubtless taking stock of him, from his ruffled hair and the missing collar and tie to his Norfolk coat and slippered feet. His difficult moment had caught him at a disadvantage undreamed of when he shirked it an hour ago.

The silence, that seemed an age, may have lasted three seconds; then:

"I'd no idea . . . Thanks — thanks very *much*," he jerked out, so emphatically that her smile dissolved in laughter still more decomposing.

"Is it as bad as that? Are you driven to bless me in italics, for fear you should curse me in capital letters? That coat and the wind would have given you quite a bad time, you know! All the same—" She looked him up and down with her confounded coolness. "I should rather have enjoyed the curses. Sincerity's always refreshing —"

"Sorry I can't oblige you — in cold blood!" Challoner apologised; his sense of humour tickled; his antagonism still on guard. "Oh, in cold blood, it would be worth nothing!"

Almost on the word, she spun round, involuntarily, tossed by a sudden strong gust right up against him. Instinctively, his left arm went out to steady her; bent from the elbow; the muscles taut as steel wire. For a moment her hands clung to it; her cloak flapping about him; her streamers playfully flicking his bare neck; a moment so acutely embarrassing that he let out an audible breath of relief when she released him and drew back a space.

"So sorry! Were you cursing me again?" She was laughing at him afresh, not quite so coolly this time. "I seem fated to

thrust myself on you! And it's just as embarrassing for me, though I don't patently advertise it — !”

“As I do?” growled Challoner, half attracted, half annoyed.

“As you do!” she retorted, quick to detect the flicker of humour beneath his gruffness. “However, in the circumstances — I forgive you!” The softened inflection of her voice was curiously known to him. He must have met her casually somewhere and forgotten the fact. “If I ventured to thank you . . . ?” A fresh gust almost unsteadied her — “Heavens! this wind! I'd better make a bolt for it. Will you tell — Kaye, I've gone on?”

As she turned away, a lively flight of stable buckets, boot brushes, tin plates, and frisking *jharrons* went careering past, a couple of grass-cutters in full pursuit; their scanty loin-cloths billowing, their nakedness gleaming with sweat; the half-uncoiled turban of the last one careening in mid-air. For one wild and whirling interlude, even the meekest, most despised inanimates had got the upper hand of man. They were having the time of their lives.

Challoner, glad to escape from personalities, burst out laughing — a big hearty laugh in which he rarely indulged.

“*Shahbash, bhai. Pukkerao jeldi!*”¹ he shouted, and laughed again at the second man's abortive attempt to acknowledge that high compliment from the Burra Sahib.

His laugh was echoed by Kaye, emerging from the tent, a shade less spruce than he had gone in.

“Oh, good — *there* you are!” he called out; and his tone advertised that he was not addressing a mere godfather.

“Yes, here I actually am!” Mrs. Vane answered lightly. “Tempest-tossed, but undamaged — thanks to Colonel Challoner, who saved me from a fall!”

“Oh, the Colonel's a strong man,” said Kaye cheerfully, relieved to find this incalculable pair already on good terms. “He was propping up that old tent with one arm and shoulder when I blew in.”

“You dry up,” Challoner snubbed him perfunctorily. “If the

¹ Well done, brother! Catch them quick!

tent's all square now, I'll finish dressing. It'll be a dead calm in five minutes — and probably the dinner won't have turned a hair." Till that moment, he had forgotten his unseemly plight; an unconscious tribute to the woman.

"Au revoir, then." Her look and gesture were for Challoner. "We shall meet — officially, — over the soup-plates."

And she went — leaning sideways a little to keep her balance, cloak and streamers all aflutter in the wind. No backward glance at the boy; no delicate hint of invitation. Challoner registered that much to her credit.

The tireless gale seemed quieter now. Tents flapped spasmodically. Pandemonium had subsided.

"Thank God, *that's* over," he remarked cryptically, leaving Kaye uncertain whether he meant the gale or his breezy interlude with Mrs. Vane. Kaye shrewdly guessed it had been breezy — knowing them both.

As Challoner moved off, he stood a moment irresolute. He was devoted to the Colonel, but still . . . In certain moods he could be difficult. And Kaye himself could be difficult, especially where his feelings were involved. Inclination favoured waiting and seeing. But habit, and a very real affection, prevailed.

A couple of strides brought him level with the man who had been more than godfather to him. "I've told Khudar Bux to come along with my shaving-glass. Can I be any more use, Colonel?"

Challoner flung him a quizzical look. "Not the remotest — thanks very much."

"Oh — well —"

From the tail of his eye, Challoner saw the fluttering figure stumble, as if over a tent rope. Without a word Kaye was off, almost at a run; and Challoner went back to his dressing — amused, as to Mrs. Vane; jarred, a trifle, as to Kaye.

He had no notion of forcing the boy's confidence; but he realised now how completely he had taken the free gift of it for granted. It had always been so between them; and Challoner — who respected his emotions sufficiently to let them alone — had valued that comfortable assurance more than he knew.

CHAPTER THREE

*My state is like the lightning's light,
Now it shines forth, and now 'tis gone from sight:
At times, amid the heavens I find my seat.
At others, I am lower than my feet.*

SA'DI

A LIVELY evening of surface contacts and surface talk — of dinner and coffee and bridge — added little to his enlightenment. Only, as regards the woman herself, it quickened appreciably both his detached interest and his latent antagonism to the type. Dinner was not more than fifteen minutes late, and — Challoner's rash prophecy was fulfilled. Not one of the five courses had 'turned a hair.' Nur Bux had not been caught napping. He knew his Kashmir. And they were courses worth saving from the fury of the gale.

Havelock Thorne was just enough of an epicure to be a boon to his guests without being a horrid nuisance to his friends: and Challoner's weakness for a perfectly turned-out dinner had of necessity not been over-indulged since he left Peshawur. It put him in a better temper with things all round, not even excepting Mrs. Vane and her flagrant tendency to hold the centre of the stage and focus attention upon her very individual self.

Undeniably she was 'easy to look at,' in Chris Chamier's expressive American phrase. Her hair revealed itself as an asset: mouse brown, shading into lighter tones, its soft abundance swathed her shapely head; and on one side sprang a Chinese tortoise-shell comb — a thing of intrinsic beauty. He liked the straight-cut, informal frock or tea-gown — or whatever it was: a deeper shade of yellow than the hood; embroidered in dull blues and browns, and loosely held in place by a barbaric girdle.

Very effective, the whole thing; very effective, the whole woman: sure of herself from her comb to her shoe buckles. He liked her flashes of sincerity and humour; but her manner seemed all the

while a trifle strained. There was an under-note of hardness and bitterness, that reminded him she had pulled through ten years of a disastrous marriage. Whether or no it had been six of one and half a dozen of the other — as darkly hinted by some charitable souls — ten years of Bob Vane and his racing cronies and his unsavoury reputation would leave their mark on a tougher woman than the one who sat at his elbow, flirting delicately, pointedly, with old Thorne, who rose to her angling like a trout to a May-fly. He was ready, apparently, to drop his dreams of the jolly little girl and her goodish bit of money at the beck of a woman, who was no doubt fooling him to the top of his bent — good old simpleton that he was.

As for Kaye, if these proceedings disturbed him, he had the grit to give no sign. He and Miss Chamier sitting opposite had plenty to say. The girl was of another make all through. Her small sturdy person, rather below middle height, was too square and firmly knit for grace. Her short blunt nose, cleft chin, and generous mouth matched her build, as her chestnut brown eyes matched her bobbed hair: thick vital hair that curled and stood out becomingly round her sunburnt neck. Her blue, flowered frock was unadorned. She wore no trinkets; not even so much as the inevitable chain. No trace of futile powder to try and hide the freckles across her nose.

To Challoner's critical eye she appeared radiantly in keeping with the robust, primeval elements of camp life. British in the good-humoured, dogged look of her; American in her mingling of shrewdness and simplicity, her generous enthusiasm for ideals and ideas.

Unskilled in the niceties of small talk, shy to the point of self-consciousness — when women were of the party — he had leisure to spare for his reflections, while Mrs. Vane bamboozled Thorne, and the young ones talked hurricanes and sport with huge zest; possibly, on Kaye's part, a shade overdone.

But the girl was patently happy, with the happiness that beautifies. Something in the fervent quality of it stirred a memory of Eve. In a trifle of ten years, she would be one and twenty, and he, selfishly dreading lest some grossly unworthy

'he-thing' would have the impertinence to claim her as his own. And the chances were she would go to him like a bird. Of what account was a superannuated father-man, though he had waited and slaved twelve long years for the meteor flash of her coming?

The longer he considered those two, the more bitterly he resented the intrusion of that superfluous woman, who wasn't exactly forwarding her designs — if he knew anything of Kaye — by the manner or the matter of her 'star turn' with Thorne. Out there, for all her familiarity and assurance, she had at least seemed genuine: but now . . .

He felt utterly at sea. Women eluded him, always: men he understood. Brown or white, he could handle them, win their allegiance, with an effortless ease that continually surprised him afresh. It was one of the supreme chances he had missed through being practically out of the War. Fate had never dealt him a crueller cut. Not to be a soldier during those four splendid, shattering years had seemed to him the last humiliation. He had done what he could. He had sent scores of Pathans and Afridis to fight for England, while he himself remained a castaway. He never spoke of it, but it had broken some secret spring in him. Beyond that hidden, indelible scar, he had suffered nothing. He had not even contributed a son . . .

At that point he pulled up short. Drifting again, as usual . . .

He 'came to' — in his own phrase — to find himself absently grinding fresh pepper over half an inverted apricot embedded in cream, realistically masquerading as a poached egg.

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned in such blank dismay that Thorne shouted with laughter, and the next moment gravely commanded a fresh *unda poach*¹ for the Commissioner Sahib.

"Good old Colonel! One of your neatest!" Kaye murmured affectionately; while Faizullah — with a confidential "*Wah, wah, Sahib*" — discreetly whisked away the unseemly proof of his master's lapse. He could tell stranger tales than that. But that the Presence should so forget himself at the dinner-table before strange 'Mems' . . . !

Challoner, meekly accepting his second *unda poach* was pray-

¹ Poached egg.

ing that Mrs. Vane might let him be, at the very moment when her voice sounded in his ear.

"Where *had* you gone to? A thousand miles away from us all? Were we so deadly dull — or are you given that way?"

"Now and then," he muttered, not with the best grace. "The natural penalty of reaching years of indiscretion!"

"The natural penalty of overwork and worry," she corrected him with smiling assurance, "and — I rather suspect, in your case — an unsociable habit of living too much alone."

"Perhaps you are right." Not one of them could guess, he flattered himself, how unerringly her light shaft struck home.

Faizullah, at his elbow, was unobtrusively proffering the sugar-caster.

"Good old chap! Afraid I should disgrace him again!" thought Challoner, wondering why the link between Faizullah and a pepper-mill seemed vaguely familiar.

Straightway there flashed on him — Nurla *dāk* bungalow and the Residency loot!

Patently his cue, if he could bring himself to the scratch. Old Thorne would enjoy the joke, and Mrs. Vane must be needing a 'breather.' But, on Faizullah's account, he must wait till the tent was cleared of hovering *khitmutgars*.

His invincible shyness made the effort of launching into a dinner-table story one of the minor ordeals of life. But shyness was not his only invincible element. And, once launched, he told it — as he could tell a tale, when the mood took him — with dramatic effect and a spice of dry humour, to the huge delight of Thorne and the embarrassingly frank appreciation of Mrs. Vane. She was the sort of woman that listens with her eyes as well as her ears. Notable eyes she had, too; and notable skill in using them. But he successfully evaded them, and addressed himself to Thorne.

"I'm not telling tales behind his back, mind you. The old sinner knows you'll hear of it and get your own again. And I fancy he's feeling a bit sheepish over having muddled things — not over the theft! A word from you, in your happiest manner, might not be amiss; just to express your pleasure at having

inadvertently been of service to me on the march through his good offices. Butter him up for a *hushkyar*¹ fellow, and affectionately advise him to study the English alphabet before he tries it on again."

"I call that ungrateful!" remarked Mrs. Vane, in her quietest voice, at his elbow. "My sympathies are all with Faizullah, even if his zeal did outrun discretion. Like Miss Miggs, his 'intenshins were excellent.' And God judges by the intention; or so we are told, by those astonishing people who appear to have inside information on the subject. A mercy for some of us, if they're right! One's sins may seem as scarlet, while one's motives are as unimpeachable as cotton wool! My own, for instance. Of course, I don't expect any of you to believe me! But that's my fatality, not my fault."

It seemed she carried conviction to one of her hearers. Thorne leaned forward, hand on shirt-front.

"Mrs. Vane, on my honour, here's *one* devout believer — from this day forward!"

It was said half in joke, but the drawling voice had a genuine ring; and the lazy eyes returned with interest her smile of acknowledgement.

Challoner saw Kaye glance across at them; a quick, desperate look, that instantly revived his antagonism. What the devil did she mean by it — fooling Thorne and upsetting Kaye? Palpably talking for effect. Thank goodness, dinner was over. Perhaps bridge would keep her quiet — if she was keen.

Card-table and chairs were set outside, under the stars, in a dead calm. A pair of hurricane lanterns, defying the assaults of suicidal moths, diffused a negligible oasis of light in a world of thronging shadows: while all around their transient outcrop of life loomed vaster shadows of the unchanging hills. There's your India. Her mighty opposites, struck sharp on each other, impart much of its unique, unforgettable flavour to life in that far country.

In spite of friendly pressure from Thorne, Challoner would not

¹ Capable.

be persuaded to take a hand. His one desire, at the moment, was to get a reasonable distance away from Mrs. Vane — from her eyes and her figure, her studied flippancy and inner hardness, and — oh, well, no denying it — her surface charm.

Smoking at ease in a long chair, outside the circle of light, he could shut his eyes to all these; and he did shut them, only to find himself wondering afresh why on earth he was so familiar with certain modulations of her voice. The note he knew only came at odd intervals, and was gone before his mind could catch the secret of its haunting association. In the end he kept his eyes open, because her voice bothered him more when they were shut.

The light from one of the lanterns delicately outlined her individual profile and made a golden transparency of her comb. Kaye was her partner; and his eyes were oftener on her face than on his cards. Yet it seemed they were romping away with the rubber. The game did keep her quieter. She was keen; and she appeared to monopolise all the luck that was going. The thing had evidently become a standing joke with them.

“It’s not a case of ‘cut for partners,’ but cut for Mrs. Vane,” declared Thorne, flourishing the seven of hearts that linked them for that round. “Wish to blazes I had your amazing luck!”

“In spite of the penalty?” She looked up at his looming figure as he changed places with Kaye. “I’ve often wished I could dispose of it — not to a friend!”

“But that’s rank superstition. Cards is cards. And your luck’s your luck. A thing to thank the gods for — ”

“Is it? I’ve often wondered — ”

Her lightness seemed shadowed a moment. Then she picked up her cards, sorted them with practised ease, and the game had hold of her again.

“Not much luck in love for her, poor soul!” thought Chal-loner on a changed inflection.

His head was aching vilely; weariness blanketed his brain. In five minutes he was sound asleep.

They woke him at eleven and persuaded him to an unearned

peg and cigarette. Mrs. Vane displayed a quite unnecessary interest in his unsociable knack of absenting himself when boredom threatened; all in the way of personal chaff; the sort of thing that raised his supposed unsociability to boiling point. So he made haste to escape; not too obviously, he hoped, though he did not greatly care. After all, the woman simply asked for it.

Kaye walked with him to his tent and hovered a few moments outside, which Challoner took for a hint that he would rather not come in. His palpable constraint was the more damning from his considerate but futile attempt to pretend it was not there.

Their parting, if laconic, was friendly enough.

It was: "Good-night, old boy. Glad to see you again."

And: "Good-night, Colonel. Hope you sleep well. You look a bit played out."

But, in spite of feeling 'played out,' perhaps because of it, Challoner lay awake a long while, surveying the situation in the fitful light of the evening's events; recognising ruefully that, in the nature of things, the boy who fights his inner battles and succeeds in keeping straight — who, at three and twenty, is neither sensualist nor embryo cynic — is the more liable to idealise some little known woman and lavish on her the inviolate treasure she frequently neither desires nor deserves. And poor old Kaye, being so made, must drink the dregs of disillusion, more often reserved for the godly than the ungodly, especially in the supreme crux — if not the supreme issue — of masculine life . . . woman.

There still remained the question — how far had matters gone? Could one hope to prevent the ultimate folly of marriage?

No easy job. And the cursed complication must not be allowed to make bad blood between him and the boy, who had made up to him, in a measure, for the virtual loss of John. His own ingrained reserve was an awkward factor in all his human relations, and the affections are shyer, more reticent, than the passions. But, if things looked serious, he would speak out and clear the air, sooner than drift into a deadly, silent antagonism, such as he had endured too often with his own father, aggravated by the years between.

Hullo! What was that? A murmur of voices passing his tent. Thought evaporated; senses sprang alert. Kaye — and that woman? Good God! Was it conceivable . . . ?

He checked himself in a spasm of disgust. That he could think it of Kaye! As to the woman — he had no scruples; probably neither had she. Her light laugh jarred. He felt thankful when the sounds passed on . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

A soul born active, wind-beaten, ascending . . .

GEORGE MEREDITH

HE woke needlessly early; a habit contracted on the march. Lying in bed irked him. Inside was a stuffy twilight, smelling of canvas. Outside, it was morning — clean and fragrant. The birds were at their matins. The snows were awake and aware.

He could manage without Faizullah — a cold sponge, flannel shirt and trousers, Norfolk coat buttoned across his strapped arm and shoulder; no tie. It looked rather slipshod; but he was not going into high society — in the accepted sense. An hour out there would put him in tune with his kind. Then — tub and early tea and perhaps the English mail. Edyth could hardly fail him again . . .

All the camp was still; even the servants' quarter hardly astir. Last night's pandemonium seemed a thing beyond belief. Films of cloud hung motionless in the powdery porcelain blue of early morning.

He strolled towards the apple orchard and the stream, Larry leaping and bounding ahead, miraculously mute. A sharp word of command at the outset had checked his incorrigible impulse to make a joyful noise, like the birds and the streams. Disobedience to that command, he knew by now, meant an ignominious return to basket and chain. So he leaped and bounded the more; emitting spasmodic yaps that were graciously overlooked.

"Lucky beggar," thought Challoner with an affectionate eye on his one unfailing companion. "He fulfils the law of his being. He is at peace with his kind. More than can be said of his master."

For all the quiet and beauty of the wide scene, a consuming restlessness was upon him. The complexities of life were too much with him. One could not snatch peace simply by turning away.

He was careful and troubled about Edyth and Kaye and India;

and, at the back of all, the trivial, exigent problem of money; though he drew pay that, ten or twelve years ago, would have left an easy margin. Impossible not to suspect a sinister motive behind the steady lift of prices wherever the native of India held control. In the matter of house rent, it was notorious. And the Government, it seemed, dared not raise a finger.

Thrusting aside his pertinacious ego, he halted on rising ground that sloped to the orchard and the river. The trees below him — apple, apricot, and peach — were alive with bird music, and soft rush of wings. Among the bushes, by the stream, a whistling thrush was trilling out his *jubilate* with enchanting variations. The early morning is his time of times; and on this particular morning this particular bird seemed beside himself with joy that he was made. Nearer by, a golden oriole was singing softly to his mate; short liquid catches, like an English thrush in June. Another went skimming through the branches — a pallid gleam of light. Larks in their scores, flickered upon the blue, flinging to earth, with each upward flight, a fresh cascade of song. And through it all ran a murmur of pure content underlying the ecstasy — the persistent, soft curru-kooing of doves.

Except for the birds and the river, all things were steeped in a magical, waiting stillness. Larry, who might have spoilt the effect, was off on the track of a beguiling smell. Now and again came the long-drawn cry of a hillman conversing with his brother man across the whole width of a valley.

A miracle of a morning — that, by rights, should herald some 'divine event' to match its quality. But at forty-three one had learnt the pathetic fallacy of that vague, futile, very human ache of expectation.

With a sigh, from confused sources, he wandered down into the orchard itself — a world of green. Young leaves above; tall flowering grasses below. A blue jay blundered out, almost across his face, with its cackling laugh and flash of barred wings. There was a lull in the chorus of song. Probably the thrush had found a snail and the pair in the peach tree were making love. Somewhere, near the river, a babbler was babbling tunelessly about purely mundane affairs.

Suddenly in the quiet, there sounded very low, the liquid call of another thrush.

Was it a thrush? Challoner had a quick ear for bird notes. He waited, hoping it would come again. It came again — softly melodious; answered, from some bushes by the stream. Was it a bird, at all? If not, the imitation was a triumph.

Random curiosity pricked him. He wandered on again towards the river. And there, under a willow, just ahead of him, sat Mrs. Vane — by all that was incredible!

Bareheaded, absorbed, she leaned against the trunk, almost with her back to him; her hat tossed aside; her dress, of some soft green stuff, scarcely distinguishable from the grass all round her. One lifted hand, palm upward, held some tempting bait; for a friendly bulbul perched on her wrist, helping himself with quick glances, short flights, and coquettish returns. On her shoulder sat a siskin, in his glossy spring coat of brown and yellow and black, not bold enough yet to oust the audacious bulbul and snatch his share.

But Mrs. Vane, in her utter stillness, seemed intent on shyer game. A third time she repeated the call — and the whistling thrush fluttered out of his bush; a beautiful creature, strongly built, yet instinct with the shy grace of all wild things, birds in particular — born aristocrats of their kind.

The thin branch swayed as he alighted and sat there, investigating, with tilted head and wary eye, the nature of this persuasive intruder. Vivid, against the green, showed the violet blue of his plumage, the glossy tips of his body feathers and his strong yellow bill. The wings of a captured insect jutted rakishly from one corner; for all the world like a cigarette.

Challoner inadvertently moved a step nearer: and instantly the thrush hopped backward.

Mrs. Vane, without stirring, said, very low: "That you, Kaye? Keep still — one moment —"

The words, the intimate tone, checked the man's incipient surrender to her more attractive mood. But, for the moment, it suited him to obey. His interest, like hers, was centred on the bird.

She repeated her call; and he hopped nearer — nearer still.

At that critical moment Challoner caught unmistakable sounds. Larry, impervious to whispered commands, was nosing him out through the long grass, quietly enough, till he stepped on a dry twig — and the thrush, with a fine display of violet wings, flew back into his leafy sanctuary.

Bulbul and siskin followed suit. Mrs. Vane dropped her hand; Challoner distinctly caught a smothered “Damn!” as she flashed round upon the intruder.

“You *vexatious* boy! Why can’t you . . . ?”

Amazement silenced her. She gazed mutely at the tall, lopsided apparition, politely lifting a *shikari* helmet.

For one unguarded moment her face was a study of very mingled feelings. Then she flung up her head and laughed.

“My mistake this time!” No trace of annoyance in her tone. “It *was* aggravating. One needs such infinite patience; but I oughtn’t to have snapped. I’m sorry!”

“So am I —” he agreed, puzzled, guarded, amused. “But don’t let me interrupt. You’ve amazing skill. You nearly took me in.”

“I took *him* in,” she triumphed. “I’ve never lured one of them quite so near. I vowed I would make him come to my hand . . .”

“You would have succeeded,” he told her, paying her the compliment of genuine response to any fragment of the genuine that he found in her very mixed composition. “Too bad of us to cut in and spoil it.” He stooped to caress the retriever, who was making as much fuss over his discovery as if his master had been lost for a week. “You’re a bit of a bull in this china shop, old man. We’ve got to clear out.”

“Not at all. I should take it as an insult.” Her light tone had a ring of decision, as of one accustomed to command anything of the masculine gender — and to be obeyed.

“Very kind of you,” he acceded, with a touch of formality. “We mustn’t add an insult to injury, eh, Larry?”

Her swift glance seemed to take stock of his surrender.

“Very neatly put! Do sit down and smoke and look comfortable.”

He sat down on a flat mossy stone, a little removed from her; extracting pipe and pouch, as commanded; holding the pipe in his imprisoned hand and manipulating it with a lean, square-cut thumb.

He wanted to smoke. He had nothing to say. So he left it to her. Securing the pipe between his teeth, he slipped a corner of his handkerchief through the ring on Larry's collar — and realised, furiously, his inability to manage the knot single-handed.

Quick as thought, she was kneeling in the grass by him fastening the knot, and smiling up at him.

"What's the idea?"

"Oh, just to hitch him on to something," he explained awkwardly. "If he fancies he's tied up, he'll keep quiet."

She whisked out a safety pin and fastened the handkerchief corner to the lower edge of his coat, giving Larry the full benefit of the brief leash.

"*That's* all the thanks we get for being faithful. They treat us very much alike!" she murmured confidentially, fondling the dog's silky ears.

Then she settled herself near by, her hands plunged palm downward into the cool grass, her intent gaze shifting from tree to tree, as if she had forgotten his presence and returned to her own affairs. Still sceptical, he felt convinced she had done nothing of the kind; but, having her profile presented to his view, he permitted himself a more leisurely scrutiny than he had ventured on yet.

He was readier now to detect good points — ready to admit that she looked years younger in that simple green thing. The lines of her face seemed less strained; and her ivory-clear skin stood the test of morning light. He liked the chiselling of her nose, with its delicately arrogant lift that had struck him at sight. He liked the lurking humour in her lips, and the lines of her graceful pose — conscious or no. Especially he liked the soft abundance of her hair. But he was not prepared to go deeper in the way of approval — yet.

Suddenly she turned. He was not forgotten.

"I'm looking for a rather rare treasure — the paradise fly-

catcher. I'm sure I caught sight of one the first morning. You know the legend, of course?"

"No. Legends are rather a hobby of mine. Let's hear it."

"Well, in the beginning —" She was on the lookout again; hands clasped round her lifted knees. "The story says he really *was* a bird of paradise, snow-white, with long ribbon plumes for his tail. But his conceit was so insufferable that Allah lost his temper and changed him into an ordinary brown flycatcher. Of course he repented too late — as we all do. So at last Allah took pity and gave him back two of his twelve streamers; but his poor face was blackened to shame him for ever! In his fourth year — if he lives — he turns snow-white, except for his face and the loveliest blue beak and eyelids. Mine was white. That's why I'm so keen to see him again."

In her present mood he found her delightful. His interest was stirred; his scepticism disarmed.

"Why not try him with a call? You seem to be a past-mistress at this sort of thing. Where did you pick it all up?"

"From an old bird-catcher at Simla. We used to have early morning assignations on Elysium. It would have amounted to a scandal, if Simla had caught us out!" A passing gravity shadowed her face. "That little old monkey-faced man did me a greater service than any white man of my very promiscuous acquaintance."

She fell silent, her gaze shifting again from tree to tree: and Challoner, taking long pulls at his pipe, felt no impulse to speak.

This woman, he reminded himself, with a twinge of revulsion, had been wife of the notorious Bob Vane — a clever lawyer, an inveterate gambler and racing-man; his phenomenal successes in both fields, tainted by suspicion of the questionable methods underlying them: a consummate bounder; with all the skill of his kind, and a way with him that could blind women to a lack men could never condone. But for all they might whisper and imply the worst, he had never been badly caught out. His first public knock had been dealt him by his wife — the perplexing woman, who sat there in the long grass talking of birds and their ways, as if nothing else mattered on earth.

"It was that year I learnt the password into my fairyland," she was saying now, in her quiet natural voice. "Birds are the only fairies left in our horribly grown-up world! They're not earth-bound, like the rest of us. They're in touch of 'the sky and the nest as well' —" She checked herself with a low laugh that vibrated in him like the note of a violin. "They're my first best friends — and the hobby of my life — that's all there is to it."

"A pretty big 'all,'" Challoner remarked, in his grave, impersonal tone. "What's a lifetime hobby but a sort of safeguard for one's sanity, in this best of all possible worlds?"

She drew in her breath and said, without looking at him: "*You* evidently understand. — Whether it's birds or babies or golf, it's saner than crazing one's brain over Bolshevik horrors and starving Austrians and sinister German-Jew financiers; the whole nightmare box of tricks that is Europe — at *peace*, purged and uplifted by the War; not to mention one's hideous conviction that — take us all round — we're a disgrace to our Dead."

The bitter note had invaded her voice again. She spoke low and vehemently, as if her thoughts must out, no matter who listened.

"To me, it seems one of the curses of modern life — this endless, useless sprawling of our thoughts and sympathies. With our one brain and our one set of overstrung nerves, we try and live the whole world's life as well as our own — aided and abetted by the newspapers. That's where an art, or a hobby, comes in with its healing touch. And for *us* — lonely ones, it just prevents the loneliness from getting into the marrow of one's bones."

Her words — her tone — conveyed the staggering impression that she believed him unmarried. The conviction smote him with the ghost of a pang. In far-off days, when it was permissible so to relish the opening phases of a possible intimacy, he had been too young to appreciate the subtleties of that delicate process as he could appreciate them now. Her changed tone, her light stress on the one significant word, stirred an answering sensation — gone in a flash, yet leaving him vaguely disturbed.

He was aware of her glance in his direction; aware of a per-

ceptible pause before he said, in his most detached voice: "A hobby like yours — yes. The principal hobby of this 'lonely one' is mental arithmetic: juggling with rupees for the benefit of a wife and family at Home."

Her start and puckered brows told him he was not mistaken.

"Married — are you?"

"Don't I look like it?"

"Frankly — no. I had written you down a shrewd, disillusioned bachelor; a sort of fairy godfather — to Kaye. It was the only personal item about you that he thought worth recording. And — you're *married?*"

"Close on nineteen years."

The statement sounded so stupendous that he added, in a lighter vein, "How do you detect the symptoms?"

She laughed abruptly. "It seems — I don't detect them. Or you're very clever at hiding them!"

He made no comment on that. Having enlightened her, he had no more to say on the subject.

It was she who spoke again. "Have you been long alone?"

"A few years. The War —"

"But now — she'll be out again soon, I expect?"

The inevitable poser!

"Possibly — yes. That is . . . if one feels justified . . . with the country so disastrously changed that one can hardly ensure her personal safety?"

Her smile had its faint quality of bitterness.

"Are there many husbands so scrupulous? Here you are, alone — and all the while she may be pining to come out and share the dangers . . . such as they are!"

The only possible answer to that would be a direct lie, which he did not choose to speak.

She misread his hesitation and promptly had her rapier thrust at him. "You've never given her the credit for that? So *like* a man! You wouldn't. None of you do — *ever!*"

"Rather sweeping," he demurred gently. "Aren't you — the least bit unfair on us?"

"Oh, I dare say — here and there. So would you be . . . in my

case. Precious few of the men *I've* had intimate dealings with have been conspicuously fair to me. Of course, I know my marriage — and all there's been to it — damns me with most decent men; and acts like a magnet . . . on the wrong sort. Now I suppose I'm shocking your scrupulousness worse than ever? But my story's public property. Where's the use of pretending? I prefer looking things in the face and speaking the truth about them, as I see it; though the truth's rather an awkward, angular thing to obtrude upon the comfortably shrouded decencies and insincerities of average human intercourse — ”

She broke off with a half sigh.

“It takes courage,” Challoner ventured, feeling hopelessly banal, hopelessly at a loss. “‘Truth is the strong thing’ — ”

“That's why it's unpopular, like the strong man in a world ‘made safe for democracy’ . . . Hush — look! There's my bird!”

Absorption held her again. There he was — the victim of vanity, boldly conspicuous, swaying on a high branch, black head and radiant body clear against the blue, his two ribbon-plumes streaming out a foot or more beyond his lesser tail feathers.

“Lovely thing!” she breathed. “I *am* glad you've seen him — O-oh!”

She had sighted a cautiously approaching figure — Kaye. She raised her hand, and he stood still; clearly bewildered by the group presented to his gaze.

“If you come as quiet as quiet, you'll see him.”

And he came ‘as quiet as quiet’ — not on account of the bird. The one thing he had come out to see was in full view — and more also.

But, in spite of his precautions, the flycatcher took wing. The flash of a snow-white arrow, black-headed, skimming the tree-tops — and he was gone.

Mrs. Vane had a touch of impatience. “Oh, *why* did you turn up just then?”

“Well, how the deuce *could* I tell?” Exasperation lurked in the boy's tone. His eyes, lingering on her face, revealed a hunger there was no mistaking.

She smiled and shook her head at him. "Nothing to get huffy about. Just my luck."

"Oh, well —" Only half appeased, he looked from one to the other.

Challoner consulted his wrist watch.

"Time I was getting back," said he.

"Nonsense. It's quite early."

"But I'm only scratch-dressed."

"So am I." Leaning nearer, she glanced at his watch. "O-oh — if you're right, I must be slow. Perhaps we'd better."

That 'we' frustrated him utterly, and further exasperated Kaye. But she handled the reins with a light skill born of much practice.

Without a word or look that he could gird against, Kaye found himself wedged between accepting a triangular stroll back to camp, or remaining alone in the orchard with 'the confounded birds.' Nor did Challoner fare much better in his tentative attempts to detach himself from the other two. For some mysterious feminine reason — she did not choose; and there an end. But no one — not even Vanessa Vane — could make him talk when he was not so disposed. He left it to them.

It was good to find his steaming rubber bath awaiting him in the canvas excrescence attached to his tent, that let in all the winds of heaven; and with a distinctly unusual sense of relief he surrendered himself to the devoted ministrations of Faizullah Khan.

The mail-runner, he learned, was not yet in.

CHAPTER FIVE

*I would that you were all to me,
You that are just so much, no more,
Where does the fault lie, where the core
Of the wound, if wound there be?*

BROWNING

SHORTLY after breakfast, the mail-bag arrived. There were two letters for Challoner: Quita and — Edyth. Kaye, he noticed, had one from his mother also; and it set him wondering how much she knew.

He carried his own off to his tent; and there he sat a moment considering the unopened envelopes. The same words written on each; and yet — the intrinsic, illimitable difference!

With a scarcely perceptible flicker of uncertainty, he opened his wife's first — and read:

DEAREST IAN,

I must not let this mail go without a line, though somehow there hardly ever seems time for settling down to a long screed. The new little car tempts us all so to make long expeditions in this wonderful spring weather. It was really very good of you, dear, helping me towards it; and we are all very grateful. It is the chief pet of the family just now. It made the Easter holidays more delightful than usual. Tony regards it as a sort of magic carpet, invented for his special benefit. John, in his loftier way, thinks much the same. So there were occasional ructions; and Tony is now openly gloating over John's return to school. But if I get running on about the children, you will soon be badly bored.

“I could do with a little more about Eve,” thought her exiled husband, while his eye scanned the next paragraph; and he read on rapidly with a queer contraction of his heart.

In your last letter (I can't find it just now) I think you said something about the chances of my coming out this autumn. It all sounded rather vague; so I hope you aren't counting on it very specially; because really I don't feel able to say “yes” straight off. You see, I might have to go back on my word and then I should feel bad about it.

It is a long time, as you said. But one feels so torn, so responsible, with our four precious young people, all needing the utmost one can do for them. Don't you agree?

You are so good about understanding that I feel I can write frankly. I am sure you would prefer it. Tony's tonsils have been worrying me badly; and there will be John going up to Oxford. *Why don't you* take your furlough in October? Then in a year's time we might be able to go out together. Not quite such a horrid wrench as going alone. And it would do you a world of good. Rub you up all round; shake you out of your rather Anglo-Indian, groovey way of looking at our big post-war problems. I do what I can — sending you the "New Democracy" and the "Coming Era." You do read them, I hope?

Her husband's irreverent grimace would have puzzled and pained her could she have seen it.

But if you came Home you could meet lots of interesting people, and see more of John. He is getting to be such a companion and he is hugely looking forward to Oxford. But don't set your heart on the Indian Civil for *him*. It's the Home Civil, or business, he is really keen on. I can see he feels rather as *I* do about India, that — morally speaking — we have really no right to be there. In fact I am quite sure it would be better all round if we could only drop this out-of-date fetish of Empire. But I know you disagree, so I won't enlarge on that. And I really must end now. I'm dead sleepy, I've been out all day.

Dear Ian, I do hope you are keeping pretty well. Peshawur must be getting rather horrible now. In fact, modern India sounds rather horrible all round. Why on earth can't we all clear out and leave them to stew in their own juice?

Another grimace, at that gem of journalese.

I am sorry to seem unsatisfactory over coming out. We'll see — nearer the time. But I wish you would solve the problem by coming Home. I suppose your answer to that will be — money. It's always money now. I'm sick of the word. I enclose a line from Eve.

Much love from the others and from your loving wife

EDYTH CHALLONER

For two full minutes Challoner sat very still; his gaze riveted on those unconsciously ironic words — "Your loving wife." The whole tone of her letter affected him like a douche of tepid water.

It was only what he expected; but the persistent repetition of covert refusal set a man wondering — “How much longer . . . ?”

As usual — being Edyth — it was very becomingly done: and, as usual, she was solicitous to avoid the rebuff direct; but the nakedness of it peered out at him between the lines. Clearly she had no immediate intention of leaving the precious children, her friends, her comfortable home, for any mere husband, six years and six thousand miles away.

Possibly, he himself had carried a shade too far his proud and sensitive reticence; his troublesome, ingrained reluctance to fight frankly for his own hand, that amounted almost to a weakness in a fundamentally strong character. That wretched car was a case in point. Unselfishness — he knew very well — had little part in it; an undercurrent of fatalism in him had more. Actively selfish he was not; but, in its passive form, he had his fair share of that unbecoming yet virile and essential ingredient of human life and character.

As for her bland suggestion that *he* should solve the problem by taking long leave, she knew perfectly well that nowadays an Indian Civilian, even on a decent screw, could only just scrape along, with his wife in India and his family at Home. He could manage for a time — by cutting down his own expenses — to keep them all at Home. What he definitely could *not* manage, with three children at costly schools, was long leave on half-pay, unless he were prepared to sponge shamelessly on relations or run into debt. And Challoner's debts — incurred in the past four years — were already becoming a millstone round his neck.

Of course his answer would be ‘money.’ For all she was ‘sick of the word,’ she was apparently not sick of its concrete equivalents: a charming house and garden near the New Forest; the very best schools for their ‘precious young people’; and now — the long-coveted car.

An urgent need of it had been discreetly emphasised, at intervals, for nearly a year, before he succumbed to the inevitable.

Personally he saw it as a luxury: precisely one of the things she could deny herself without serious inconvenience. She evidently saw it as a necessity — the fruits of associating with car-folk.

She had even been inspired to make out a case for economy. Had he considered how it would save the cost of picnic outings and paying calls in a scattered locality? *So* convenient for running up to town; or taking peeps at the girls in term-time. Her pleasant, plausible tone made a man feel a curmudgeon for long-ing to answer back and knock spots out of her specious arguments.

The common predicament that, for both, the words 'luxury' and 'necessity' held entirely different meanings, had long been a minor source of friction between them; and after-war conditions had not made matters easier for either. Is there any subject on earth more fruitful of discord than the eternally vexed question as to what constitutes waste of money or waste of time? It is a conviction impervious to argument: and who but the most inveterate wrangler could carry on an argument across six thousand miles of sea?

Finally, when it came to Christmas with an approaching birthday in January, Challoner had found himself wavering reprehensibly; and an announcement that Edyth was learning to drive, in the hope of better luck next year, had proved the last straw . . .

At least he had the satisfaction of knowing that it was 'the chief pet of the family,' and had 'made the Easter holidays more delightful than usual.' Well — well — doubtless that was the main function of husbands and fathers, in nine cases out of ten . . . But there were times when he came near hating that car.

If she really wanted him Home, the thing lay in her own hands. Let her come out to him, even for a couple of years: bring Tony, lease the house furnished, for a fancy sum; help him to economise on the spot — and the thing might be achieved. But *would* she . . . ?

Deliberately, he folded up the thin sheets, deliberately tore them across and across. Without putting the thing into words, he knew that only a serious emergency would induce him to repeat an obviously unwelcome request. There was nothing for it but to carry on till the chances of getting Home looked brighter than they did at present.

He turned, for relief, to Eve's little note, folded and ostentatiously sealed with his own seal, bearing the Challoner crest; one of his many gifts to her. It scarcely amounted to a letter. It was little more than an impulsive ejaculation — infinitely better to his taste.

Oh, my nicest darlinest Daddy, when *are* you coming back again? I *am* so tired of wanting to hug you and trying to *think* what you really look like. It won't ever come properly and the photos don't seem right a bit. They haven't got the twinkle and that's what I love. So do tell your horrid Government to hurry up and send you. I am sure they would if they only knew. Mother says hurry because of the post so I am putting a lot of extra kisses to make up. Beryl says it's babyish to put kisses. But I want to kiss you and I don't care if it is.

I *am* your lovinest

EVE.

Followed a flying postscript — a wild, unseemly scrawl.

Do you believe Don't Care came to a bad end? I'm sure he *never* did. I think he is the best of all the bad demons. Anyhow, he sounds the bravest. That's what *I* like.

EVE.

The contrast between them — child and woman!

For himself, he found more of 'woman' in Eve's young effusion than in Edyth's carefully penned pages. She was Eve, right enough — first of her kind, to comfort and torment the children of men. *She* would have her apple and wheedle some willing slave into going shares with her — whatever the price — true to the name that had been his own choice for her. Edyth, he remembered, had disapproved. Eve wasn't a 'nice' person. She didn't care about names out of the Bible; and somehow Eve 'sounded rather naked.'

His irreverent laughter had quite hurt her feelings; and they had not been appreciably soothed by his grave assurance that he would not insist upon their small daughter living up to her unclothed name!

She had refused to see the feeble joke. But he had gained his point. He had set his seal upon the child; and she had justified, every way, his early conviction that here was the daughter of his heart. Already she had her standard — "the bravest. That's

what *I* like." Thank God, *she* didn't mention the confounded car!

He slipped the note into a division of his letter-case that contained several others in the same hand; stood up and stretched himself — unsatisfactorily, owing to the bandaged arm. The tent felt suddenly stifling, unendurable. Quita's thick envelope promised one of her inimitable, rambling screeds. He would carry it off somewhere up the hillside, and enjoy it at leisure. He had no desire to see or speak to any of them till the effect of Edyth's tepid douche had subsided, more or less.

Unsociable beast! This was the way he forgathered with his kind. But it was her doing. He had felt a different man when he entered the tent.

CHAPTER SIX

Guard well thy heart, for out of it are the issues of life.

SOME way above the camp he found shade and grass and a breeze under a mighty walnut tree. Lying full stretch, against a mossy hummock, he surrendered himself to the healing influences of the scene, the murmur of many waters — and the illusion of Quita's voice.

Well — how goes it with you, my very dear Ian? [She began in her informal fashion.]

I feel a worm, and no woman for neglecting you these many weeks. But you have our Kaye comparatively handy. So you've not been quite cut off from your family — by adoption! But that doesn't absolve me from feeling a worm, knowing my Ian and his particular taste in letters.

My only excuse is the eternal, egotistical excuse of the artist — two absorbing canvases, which naturally seem to eclipse anything I've ever done. They probably don't. But that dear illusion is the oil that keeps the flickering flame of genius alight and I am the cotton wick that must absorb it — or perish.

Dear man, *don't* I wish I could ask you into my studio for an hour — two hours, or three! How we should talk! Or rather, how *I* should and how you would listen! You almost rival Eldred in that precious capacity.

Do write me at length when you can about my blessed boy. Tell me just what he looks like — a mother's so apt to forget! — and what he is doing with himself at this particular moment. He writes fully and delightfully as you know. But the nicer they are, the more they are apt to tell too little about themselves.

Now for personal news — pictures, of course! I've had a quite successful "one-man show" all on my own. It brought me in some "harmless necessary" cheques and a sheaf of criticisms that made me feel quite good-tempered for weeks. Your portrait — the old one (or should I say the young one?) I did in the Golden Age at Gulmarg — came in for some rather flattering notice, both as to the subject himself and my treatment of him, which — with my engaging modesty — I have always considered masterly . . .

“Masterly” — she was right. It was a thing of genius, of her peculiar genius for ‘getting inside’ her subject. At the time he had been too young, too crazed with his own infatuation for her, to recognise either its intrinsic quality, or its clear revealing of the shy, hidden thing she had plucked out and set there on canvas for all and sundry to see.

It was that which had startled him when he saw it again — nearly three years married, and father of a son. He had stood there before the picture, feeling hot all over, while the ghost of his early youth and his earliest love looked at him out of his own eyes. For a moment he had felt angry with Quita. In the pursuit of her precious art, she had no scruples.

Then common sense told him that all and sundry could see nothing of the kind. Only he saw it, and she, who in the process of painting that portrait, had herself awakened his manhood.

‘In the Golden Age at Gulmarg . . .’ That chance phrase, like a diviner’s rod, drew up into the light a host of hidden memories, as vivid as if the twenty-two years between had been a watch in the night. The smell of sun-warmed grass, the music of birds and waters, conspired with it to recall those far-off delectable summers at Gulmarg; that particular summer, when even the magnet of sport could not hold its own against the magnet of Hut 23, where Quita lived alone with her babies; while Eldred up at Gilgit — first Warden of the Marches — paid flying visits to his family, whenever he could snatch a week or so from his exacting job.

For Challoner, the Eldred of those Gilgit years ranked among the unforgettable things. Only afterwards he knew how the older man’s untiring energy and devotion had keyed up his own standard of work; how it had fed the secret flame of his ambition. Endlessly good to him they had been, those two, during his first years of shyness and loneliness; his temperamental detachment aggravated by the early loss of his gifted mother and the harsh streak in an otherwise admirable father. He had not been six months in India when the old man died suddenly of pneumonia: and from that time onward they had become, as Quita said, his family by adoption.

When she settled herself in Hut 23, he had fallen into the habit of spending his leave in Kashmir: and she, with her airy disregard of convention, had made him free of her hospitality whether Eldred happened to be with her or no. So there had been many unforgettable weeks of friendly intimacy with a woman who was no flirt, but whose genius for comradeship had its dangerous element, in spite of the fact that she was his elder by nearly twelve years. Women of her type and temperament are ageless. Theirs is the blended charm of mind and heart and spirit — a charm to which Ian Challoner was susceptible in the extreme.

For a time, all had gone well. He had merely become aware that life held miracles of sympathy and understanding hitherto undreamed of by a boy too early bereft of both.

Then arose the question of the portrait; one of her sudden imperious inspirations. At first — how well he remembered! — he would not have it, shrank from it, as if warned by a subconscious premonition. But Quita, caught in the swirl of an ‘inspiration,’ was a creature impervious to the objections of any mere man, let alone a boy.

The sittings had quickened intimacy; had given their whole relation a more personal flavour; and then — upheaval: a sunburst of illumination, at once exalted and catastrophic . . .

He whom they had more than befriended — to repay them in *this* fashion! That had been his first coherent thought. And his second — what was to be done? For him, sincerity amounted to a fetish. Any attempt at acting a part . . . with her could have but one end — ignominious failure.

Yet their intimate relation and his position as her guest made it impossible to trump up some plausible excuse for getting away from her. After a wakeful night of heart-searching and conflict, he had reached his momentous decision; to tell her the truth, frankly and simply, and take himself off — for good.

He had told her — sitting at tea under the pines, an informal camp meal, columbines springing up all about, the scent of wild roses in the air. (Their scent disturbed him faintly to this day.) And the look of her as she listened to his broken phrases — the friendly smile in her eyes; no hint of astonishment or dismay —

had so puzzled and upset him, that he could only gaze at her reproachfully and stammer, "You — you *knew?*"

And she, with her smile — that made him feel like a kid of six confessing he had stolen an apple: "My dear darling boy — would I be a miracle of sapience if I guessed? Don't look at me like that — or you *will* upset the apple-cart. Be normally sensible for ten minutes, if you can — and listen to me."

Clearly, as if it were yesterday, he recalled her every word and his own chaotic sensations under that wholesome douche of cold water. Quita's douches were never tepid.

"It was plucky of you to tell me straight," she had said, leaning her elbows on the table between them. "And I'm not shocked — or angry, one little bit. It's simply the most natural and beautiful thing in the world. And it won't harm you — or me either — if you take it the right way, which you've *got* to do — for all our sakes. Point number one." She ticked it off on her forefinger. "Point number two — you must tell yourself that this will pass." She silenced his vehement protest. "It's in the nature of things. I'm talking plain sanity — and I'm not so unkind as I sound. Only small wits, without human understanding, sneer at calf love —" Another abortive protest here. "Dear Stupid, haven't I *told* you the thing itself is natural and beautiful? It's only the phrase that jars. For a boy like you, with brains and imagination and grit, it's just a gleam from the light that never was — a safeguard against baser loves. Believe me, I'm really not *in* it — except that I happened to be there at the critical moment. And India doesn't supply the chorus girl or the 'young lady' at the tobacconist's, which is one reason why the well-regulated people at Home hear such regrettable tales about the married women and the snare of the grass widow. Now, look here, Ian, I want to help you, if you'll only let me. You've no mother or brothers, and your good father was a Puritan. Has anyone ever talked to you, frankly and sanely, about all that?"

Reddening awkwardly, he admitted that no one had.

"Well — if you'll give me leave — I will. Don't be alarmed."

He had been more than alarmed. He had been terrified. This was not at all the kind of thing he had screwed himself up to face.

Consumed with shyness and dread, he had given her leave; and she had proceeded to talk frankly and sanely, to his occasional embarrassment, but — as he now knew — to the lasting good of his soul and body.

Incidentally she seemed to have forgotten all about his momentous decision. His tentative reminder had merely evoked the brisk retort: "My dear boy, what would Eldred think? How would Eldred feel?" That, it seemed, was her one serious concern. If Ian played up like a man, there would be no need to drag *him* into it at all. With a hundred responsibilities on his shoulders, she could not hear of his being worried by such a trivial personal mishap; an attitude as wholesome and tonic as it had at first been disconcerting to his inner, exalted sense of having risen to the stature of manhood.

No denying, at the time, he had been considerably hurt by her reception of his great discovery. Not till long afterwards had he recognised how effectually it had curbed his young tendency to self-pity; how it spurred him not to fall below the standard she demanded of him.

So, with an heroic effort, he had swallowed his injured pride, damped down his volcanic emotions — and stayed on.

The thing was simply ignored. They did not speak of it again.

But some days later, strolling after dinner in the starlight, she had told him — with what delicacy and simplicity he could better appreciate now than then — of her hope that another child was coming early in the New Year. Unerringly she had perceived that the fact itself — and the high compliment she paid him in speaking of it — would at once deeply stir him and steady him; as, in effect, it did.

And early in the New Year — when her hope was fulfilled — she had crowned her compliment by asking him to stand godfather to her small son, whom they proposed to christen Ian Kaye, after himself.

Here were reasons, all-sufficient, why this particular boy should be dear to him almost as his own.

She had assured him the thing would pass: but Quita had an

unforgettable quality, and his own tenacious Northern nature found it always easier to hold fast than to let go.

After the Gilgit achievement, Eldred had taken long leave that was years overdue. Quita had said to Ian privately, at parting, "If you want to make me really happy about you, let me find you married when I come back." And he had not known how to answer her.

Though unruly emotions had subsided, an aftermath of inner allegiance remained. That poignant experience at Gulmarg — its purifyings and withholdings, its transition from passion to intimate friendship — had tuned his whole nature to a higher pitch. And ambition, though a still flame, was none the less a consuming fire. With work for his mistress, why should he marry — even to please her? He lacked private means. He also lacked skill in making friendly approaches to girls of his own age; and as to saddling himself with so complicated an unknown quantity . . . !

But loneliness is a potent factor — if, at times, a delusive one — in the making of marriage; a loneliness of heart, and spirit, more often felt than admitted by sensitive men of character and imagination. With a brave assumption of self-dependence 'they ride for ever seeking sympathy and understanding; to rest, to confess, to be made whole . . .'

Nevertheless, Quita had not found him married on her return; and she had accepted the fact without comment. Their friendship, firmly established, had proved an inestimable possession for both, in spite of the years between; and, so far as Challoner was aware, Lenox had never heard of his volcanic indiscretion to this day.

It was not till nearly four years afterwards that Edyth de Wynton crossed his path at a moment when the curse of inner loneliness was strong upon him: and in the space of six months she had scattered all his settled convictions and annexed him for life.

Barely two and twenty, fresh out from Home — on a cold-weather visit to a married sister — she had attracted him at sight; not vehemently, but pleasantly, which had put him off his guard.

Later on he had discovered, to his honest amazement, that attraction had been mutual. He did not discover, either then or later, that Edyth's sister was an inveterate marriage-maker; that Edyth's brother-in-law — a man of his own Service — had predicted 'a future' for the shy young Settlement Officer — 'a devil to work' — whose uncommon gift for languages and knack of getting at the people already marked him out for distinction.

As to Edyth herself, her fresh English bloom, her touch of prudishness (in his eyes a very becoming simplicity) seemed to set her apart from the average Anglo-Indian girl — who was, in most cases, a 'better sort' all round. No *fin-de-siècle* young person this. One could not imagine her lifting a finger to ensnare the unwary male. And yet — shy, difficult, even reluctant as he was — how surprisingly smooth had been the way of courtship; if courtship it could be called, to accept and appreciate the rather exciting novelty of friendship with an attractive, intelligent girl.

She had professed, at that time, to be 'thrilled' with India; to enjoy the companionship of a man who read serious books and 'had ideas about things,' better than the rivalries of cheerful, slangy subalterns, who danced divinely and proposed automatically on the slightest provocation. For her sister had casually let it become known that her face was not her fortune. The fact that he, himself, did not propose automatically, even when opportunity offered, had probably enhanced his value in her eyes.

So, from day to day — by a process he now more clearly understood — they had drifted down the easy incline that so innocuously paves the way to marriage in India. Though attraction had increased with intimacy, he had still remained half reluctant, wholly alarmed. His inner, unexpressed attitude had amounted to this: "Here's my chance — why not take it? I'd never manage it again. She's a delightful girl; and she seems to think I'm not a bad chap. If I didn't have a shot at it, after all this, it wouldn't be fair play. And Quita will be pleased — "

Another momentous decision. No one to save him from it this time — and the thing was done.

The actual step — that had seemed so formidable in anticipation — had proved amazingly simple when it came to the point.

She had taken the whole thing so serenely, had discounted his awkwardness so charmingly. And, at the time, how grateful he had been; loving her the more for it, reading into it God knows what of delicate reticences, of baffling innocences that enhanced her charm.

And afterwards — ? Well — she was herself. She could make herself no other.

If he had suffered a fuller measure of ultimate disillusion than falls to nine men out of ten, it had doubtless been his own fault, in the main. Certain natures are born to disillusion. Was she to blame if he had pictured an enchanted garden — screened from prying eyes — into which he would be admitted when intimacy deepened; and had found, instead, a neatly laid-out parterre offering no scope for voyages of discovery?

His was the supple, seeking nature that grows, as inevitably as it breathes; shedding old misconceptions, absorbing fresh points of view. She — as he had realised too late — was of those whose fundamental self crystallises early. To such natures, fresh knowledge accrues, merely. Experience, however devastating, appears to leave no mark. Serenely self-encased, they emerge vitally unchanged; using the same turns of phrase, apparently thinking the same thoughts . . .

Perhaps he misjudged her. There seemed to have been developments of a sort during her six years at Home. But even at twenty-one she had been an incipient 'intellectual.' It was that tendency — ironically enough — that had first drawn them together.

But even while he criticised, even while her decently cloaked refusal jarred him all through, an innate sense of justice compelled him to admit his own share of blame for a comparative failure that, unhappily, could not be denied. Because of his loneliness and because she was kind, he had followed the line of least resistance, while giving her only of his second best; since he had no more to give. Her, he credited with having given him — for a time, at least — the best of which her nature was capable. If it had failed, in nineteen years, to call forth the best from him, that, surely, was their mutual misfortune; not her fault . . .

Thus the circle of his wandering thoughts swung round again to the present. He took his time over finishing Quita's long, wide-ranging letter. The strong sun filtering through the leaves, the insistent murmur of the river, the drowsiness following upon a wakeful night, lulled him, unaware, into a blessed, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Here's a dish I love not; I cannot endure my Lady Tongue.

SHAKESPEARE

HE strolled back to camp shamelessly late for tiffin to find the meal in full swing. His trumped-up apology impressed no one — and he knew it.

“What’s half an hour or so to a lucky devil on leave, with mail letters to chew?” Thorne put both feet in it with the best intentions. “Knew you wouldn’t mind if we started. My tame Governor and his etceteras are due at three sharp.”

“Oh, of course, quite right,” Challoner muttered, securing the nearest dish. He could feel Mrs. Vane’s eyes on him. Was she also concerning herself superfluously with his mail letters?

“I’ve had a high old time over grain accounts,” Thorne carried on, dimly aware of something amiss. “Our Uzman Shah had urgent orders to lay in a big surplus store. There was a nasty shortage last year. And the results — on paper — put the ‘bulging cornbins’ of Russia to shame! He swears the Fort is chock-a-block with it. When I asked how the miracle came to pass, he slithered off it with his best party smile. The Sahib must always have his little joke. For this Sahib, seeing’s believing. So I’ve told him I intend to inspect the said miracle. He wants the honour of our company for tea, at his place; ladies and all. When he comes, I shall propose to take the Fort *en route*. He’s a plausible devil. I’d love to catch him out.”

“Oh, *do*,” begged Miss Chamier in her persuasive contralto voice. “It’s all as new as a play to me — these theatrical gentlemen in their peach-pink turbans and embroidered dressing-gown affairs. And you’re just an ideal universal provider! The slick way you turned that hurricane on and off was the neatest thing! Do fix up a dramatic ‘curtain’ with your cornbins and all.”

Thorne bowed his acknowledgements.

“Anything to please you, my dear young lady. But the nature

of the 'curtain' rests with his Governorship. I won't let him off an ocular demonstration, I promise you."

Uzman Shah was only half an hour late — a trifling oversight for an Eastern magnate. His beard, newly oiled, rivalled the gloss of his patent-leather shoes; but a job lot of discoloured teeth rather spoilt the effect of his smile.

Folding his 'embroidered dressing-gown' decently over the most prominent feature of his person, he expressed fulsome pride and pleasure that the ladies would deign to honour his abode. If his pride and pleasure were damped a trifle by Thorne's 'little joke' concerning the Fort, not the flicker of an eyelash betrayed him. His sole concern was for the *Mem-lōg*. Might they not prefer to come up afterwards for tea, when it would be cooler?

Thorne commended his thoughtfulness; but the ladies particularly wished to see the Fort: and he scored mentally, 'Fifteen, love.'

The sun blazed as it only can blaze through the thin air of Himalayan heights; and the cavalcade — led by Thorne and his Governor — progressed something too leisurely for British taste. Of the five, Challoner suffered most. His head was aching vilely again; but he could not very well drop out of the programme. Besides, a little affair of this kind, stage-managed by Thorne, was not a thing to be missed.

But physical sensations were eclipsed when he found Mrs. Vane riding beside him, politely expressing concern for his health. What the devil did it matter to her if he chose to be ill?

"Oh, I'm all right, thanks," he said, none too graciously, by way of dismissing the subject.

"Well, you don't look it," she retorted, unabashed. "I came on you asleep under that tree, and you looked positively ill."

Her announcement so patently staggered him that she laughed her soft, ingratiating laugh. "My fault, of course. Intruding again! But if you *will* go to sleep in public — !"

"Public! I was right off the beaten track. How could I suppose — ?"

"Well, how could *I* suppose — ? If you're one of those odd

people who dislike being discovered asleep, I'm sorry I trespassed on your vast privacy! Did you have a bad night?"

"Pretty well." He stared straight between Shahzada's ears. The memory of her light laugh and his last waking thought of her lent an added constraint to his tone. But it seemed there was no choking off.

"Headache?"

"More or less." (A wonder she didn't suggest heartache!)

"Kaye told me about your nasty fall near Leh. I'm sure you aren't fit, yet, for hot-weather work."

"Plenty of us aren't fit," he retorted with a straight look. "But the work's got to be done."

She did not answer at once. Then she went off at a tangent. "Well, I hope your wife's coming out soon to look after you."

That jerked him badly; but he gave no sign. "Oh, yes — as soon as circumstances permit."

"I'm glad to hear it," was all she said — and there fell a merciful silence.

Perhaps she was aware of having trespassed again. He himself was distinctly aware that he had had enough of it. He found himself revolving base expedients for escape. He barred these direct personal assaults . . .

The other two were riding close behind. Turning in his saddle, he indicated a peak, connected with a local legend. For Kaye, it was more than enough. He promptly edged up alongside and capped the tale with one he had from his *shikari*.

Then Miss Chamier chimed in, and Challoner blessed her, seeing his chance. The path had narrowed a trifle; and the least hint to Shahzada sufficed.

The other two rode forward; and he found himself safe beside the girl, full of intelligent interest in her surroundings; no irksome intrusion of the personal note. He hoped his manœuvre had not been too obvious; but Kaye would make ample amends.

It was a relief when they reached the wide main gateway. Within the walled quadrangle there was a measure of shade. There were also many locked doors; and a venerable scarlet *peon* jangling a theatrical bunch of keys.

"Now, my friend, how many rooms full?" asked Thorne genially.

Uzman Shah, smiling unsmilingly, indicated the largest door; and the scarlet *peon* fumbled in the lock, first one key, then another — without success.

"Son of an owl! Have thine eyes dropped out?" growled Uzman Shah; and the ancient fumbled afresh with shaking fingers.

"Honoured Lord," he murmured, "there is doubtless some error."

Uzman Shah turned to Thorne, all suavity now.

"The Sahib will please excuse. My foolish servant has brought the wrong keys."

"Well, let him go and find the right ones."

"He says, by great misfortune, Imam Bux, keeper of all keys, has left the office."

"He hasn't left Hindustan, has he? Send your man to his house."

"But Heaven-born — he lives a long way off. It will take too much time."

"Don't you fret about that." Thorne's manner was positively paternal. "Time was made for slaves. This is your *tamasha*. I wouldn't spoil it — for half the corn in your grain-bags."

An exhibition of the tombstone teeth, perfunctorily acknowledged the Sahib's 'little joke'; a sharp order was given. The scarlet ancient withdrew.

Then the Governor — chivalrous soul — grew concerned for the plight of the ladies. Let them all repair to his house for refreshment. It was hot in the Fort. They would tire of waiting.

"No hurry, my friend," said Thorne, with a glance at Chaloner, who was leaning his sound shoulder against a shadowed wall, studying every face present with that deceptively abstracted gaze of his. "Let chairs be brought. If Imam Bux delays, there *are* other ways of opening doors." His hand closed casually on a great beam that leaned against a pillar. "We could manage it with this bit of matchwood you have so thoughtfully provided."

The shot took effect. Another servant was hurriedly des-

patched, and, with great show of zeal, windsor chairs were produced.

"Stalls twelve-and-six, including tax!" murmured Chris confidently to Thorne, as she plumped down on hers. "I can't follow half you say, but, from the look of your friend, it's going to be great!"

"He's in a blue funk," said Thorne. "Great Scott! Here's our latest back again. Must have run about a mile a minute!"

It was the second messenger — a very Hermes — closely followed by Imam Bux.

One after one, fresh keys were tried — with precisely the same result.

Thorne's hand closed again on the beam. "I've had enough of play-acting," he said sternly.

"*Na-na, Sahib,*" the Governor entreated him. "This fellow is a fool."

His scowl doubtless conveyed some signal, for a key, already tried, was found miraculously to turn in the lock.

The door, pulled outward, revealed a large windowless room — stark empty. Not a grain-bag — not so much as a grain — visible to the naked eye. Only a soft squeak and scurry of rats startled by the influx of light.

Then did Havelock Thorne let loose the thunderbolts he had been keeping in check till the fraud he shrewdly suspected stood revealed. He had at command a very effective vocabulary; and he made the most of it — since the ladies, happily, could not understand.

But it seemed the end was not yet.

While the Englishman swore at the Governor, the Governor swore roundly at his dependents for daring to make fools of himself and the Commissioner Sahib. His choicest flowers of abuse completely took the shine out of Thorne's amateur epithets; a fact his own followers appreciated, if the Sahib-*lōg* did not.

In conclusion he commanded them — if they valued their ears and noses — to open immediately those rooms in which the bags of grain *were* stored.

Dramatic pause.

Knees and hands shook visibly, for fear of what would befall if they obeyed this unnatural order, in place of the strict injunctions previously given them.

All they dared venture — in the excruciating circumstances — was to murmur again of keys that had been left behind.

But Thorne had heard and seen enough of keys to last him his natural life.

“Come on, Lenox,” he said, stripping off his coat.

Kaye sprang to help him; and the Governor stood watching them, his thick lips drawn back from his teeth like a snarling dog: while Chris Chamier ecstatically squeezed her small square hands. After ‘yards of Oriental slithering and dithering,’ it did her Anglo-Saxon heart good to see a pair of Englishmen in their shirt-sleeves stoutly belabouring that old door.

Uzman Shah and his dependents remained motionless watching — waiting . . . And the faces of the crowd near the gateway were a study.

But, if the door was strong, Anglo-Saxon thews proved stronger.

With a resounding crash the splintered boards clattered to the ground, and there fell another dramatic pause.

Emptiness again.

Thorne swung round on his heel.

“By God, I’ll have no more of this! Speak straight — if you know how.”

A quiet man roused is always impressive; and in this case the effect was heightened by the contrast of Thorne’s commanding height and bulk with the cowering creature before him — the mean soul stripped of its trappings.

To the amazement and delight of Chris Chamier, the Governor of Kargil, in jade-green turban and ‘embroidered dressing-gown,’ dropped incontinently upon his knees before the Englishman in his shirt-sleeves, pressing his forehead to the dusty ground and whining for mercy.

Thorne’s blaze of anger subsided into mere disgust.

“Get up and take it standing, you white-livered thief,” he addressed the abject thing at his feet with quiet scorn. “No

matter to *you* if the people starve this winter. That's my business. And I'll see to it — with *your* assistance — *summach-ta?*"¹

Clearly the creature did understand; for the whining began afresh.

"Get up!" Thorne repeated brusquely. "My orderlies will escort you to your house. You will appear at the Public Durbar to-morrow; and there I will settle matters with you. The ladies will not come to tea."

Since nothing was to be gained by further abasement, the prostrate, portly one scrambled to his feet. Two orderlies took charge of him. The people near the main gateway melted away, leaving Thorne and his little party alone with the two gaping doorways, like empty eye-sockets, and the buzzing of persistent flies.

Thorne lazily slipped on his coat and looked across at Challoner — the man who understood.

"Just what I reckoned," he said, "only a shade more so. Insolent devil. He'll pay a long price for his practical joke. What d'you think — ?" He indicated other doors.

"I think it's all been sold, and they've collared the money — he and his cronies in the district."

Thorne nodded. Then he remembered the ladies. "Hard luck!" he said. "Tea's a wash-out. And you've another hot ride first."

"We shall survive!" Mrs. Vane smiled with undisguised approval on the hero of the afternoon. "Your ocular demonstration was worth many teas! Solomon should have added to his four wonders 'past finding out,' the way of an Oriental with his own people."

"No mystery about that for Solomon. He was of the same *jāt!*" remarked Challoner; while Kaye, at her elbow, was unobtrusively trying to detach her from the group and secure her for the ride home.

She had an indulgent smile for his manœuvres; and, as they strolled towards the main gateway, Thorne turned to the

¹ You understand?

girl, who was pulling on her riding-gloves with unnecessary precision.

"You got your 'curtain,' Miss Chamier? Hope it was worth twelve-and-six, including tax?"

She started and looked up, as if her thoughts had gone upon a different journey. "Oh, rather! It was fine! I wanted to clap that old Shylock's exit. But what can you do to him?"

"Not very much. He has friends at court. What d'you think, Colonel? A thumping fine to make good?"

"A cool thousand," Challoner decreed after two seconds' reflection. "Not a rupee less. Degrade him publicly to-morrow before all his people. That's a move they can't annul at Headquarters. And send him, under escort, to Srinagar, for further orders. Of course he *ought* to be kept under arrest till the fine's paid."

"Not likely! He'll patch up a plausible tale in which I shall figure as a tyrant with a down on him. And they'll let him loose *ek dum*. But I'll worry round till I get the money out of him and the other rajahs, or it'll be famine — no less. What do *they* care, with a Sahib or two handy to organise relief? Of course, half the trouble is that these johnnies are made to pay cash down for their posts and their empty titles; and they repay themselves by fleecing the people."

"India — a nation; ripe for self-government!" chuckled Challoner. "A pity your M.P. friend wasn't here, after all."

"What's the pow-wow, you two?" cried Kaye from the gateway. "Who says tea?"

But his high spirits were short-lived. The homeward ride was not for him. Mrs. Vane took charge of Thorne, flirting with him ostentatiously; and Challoner flattered himself there would be no more intimate enquiries after his health.

Just as well the boy should see for himself the sort she was. And yet — this morning in the orchard — ? A bewildering creature. Anyhow, he ought to feel grateful to her — playing into his hands.

Back in camp, they found Dr. Norman just arrived from Dras; a red, angular Scot, all bones and sinews and untiring zeal.

“My fate!” thought Challoner, aware that his accursed temperature was rising again. But for all his distrust and his dislike of being ‘tinkered at,’ he knew his man; knew very well that, if he were fool enough to crock up, he could scarcely fall into sounder hands.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*How shall I fix you, fire you, freeze you —
Break my heart at your feet, to please you?*

BROWNING

IF Challoner was puzzled, young Kaye Lenox was nearing the edge of despair. It was true he had had the 'time of his life,' camping and shooting among the glories of the Sind Valley. It was also true that his impromptu picnic had failed of its purpose. But if hope flagged occasionally, that thwarted purpose still survived, in defiance of patent obstacles and the dim doubts of his saner moments.

Only twenty-three — what of that? He felt years older — he that, at nineteen, had been pitched headlong into realities the most stirring, the most devastating that any youth of any world-period could well be called upon to face. There were hundreds in the same case: young in years; old in disillusioning experience. Of those that were not nerve-shaken for life, there remained a large proportion — like Kaye himself — sound in mind and body, yet dimly aware that they had been cheated of their youth; that this violent, money-ridden, after-war world seemed none the better or the happier for their loss that nothing could redeem.

He thanked his lucky star that he was in India — and up North. Gandhi or no Gandhi, the Himalayas still stood where they did; the Border still exercised its magnetic attraction. Kashmir was still a land of manifold enchantments and delights, marred only — at the moment — by his own distracting fever of blood and brain. He was still feeling furiously sore about the ride home. What price the ecstasy of being in love? He had never experienced a more confoundedly uncomfortable state of life . . .

In an access of impatience he sat down abruptly, kicked off his slippers and stared hard at his pumps — without seeing them.

What he saw was himself — and her alone together . . . at last! No chance for Thorne to cut in.

But if Thorne, in fancy, could be banished at will, there were occasions when Chris — and the memory of their good time in Peshawur — would intrude unbidden, mutely reproaching him for his altered state of mind — and heart. It was only a few months ago; and yet it all seemed incredibly far away. He recalled his earlier sensations with an odd, inconsistent pang. It made him feel mean; though, of course, *she* couldn't possibly know of his deflected impulse towards her. She simply couldn't, he assured himself, with the readiness of the delinquent whose conscience is making awkward remarks. She was still the same as ever; a topping pal; as straight as a boy, with the added attraction of being a girl — which made all the difference. He hoped she didn't so much as suspect the kind of difference it was beginning to make, before . . .

Oh, damn it all! How the blazes were things going to sort themselves? And what the blazes did *she* mean — the way she was carrying on? Last night, for instance . . .?

He tugged at his braces so violently (he was dressing for dinner) that a button flew off; and he swore again — this boy, whose cool courage in desperate straits had won him a couple of decorations and a long scar that oddly kinked his right eyebrow. But women were worse than war. You couldn't stand up against them, man to man.

And there was the dear old Colonel obviously wondering why he was left on the doormat. But, in view of looming objections and elderly sagacities, Kaye wanted his innings first with Her. The Colonel had a bit of an edge to his tongue. He had also, when he chose, a persuasiveness, to which Kaye, who dearly loved him, had always been susceptible.

Worse than that — there were lucid moments when he jibbed, instinctively, at the idea of an imposed limitation, however dear and desirable. Some streak in him, perhaps, of his incurably unmarriageable Uncle Michael, who owned a studio and an *appartement* in Paris, where he lived pleasantly and variously without benefit of clergy. Also, in part, the influence of an age in which

the young of neither sex are disposed to take the constraint of marriage for granted.

But the urgent fact remained that at this moment he passionately craved Vanessa Vane. Three precious weeks of leave still remained to him. Thorne's camp would break up the day after to-morrow. And they hadn't a shred of a plan in being. By some means he must get at her after dinner and talk things out. Then he would be in a better position to tackle the Colonel.

'The luck' favoured him. He caught her up alone, on their way to the dinner tent.

"Look here," he said urgently, "I most awfully want a talk with you to-night. There'll be four for bridge without us. Let's cut it and go for a stroll — *please*. We must fix up something —"

She smiled at his impetuosity. "Must we? Won't to-morrow do? I don't think Colonel Challoner is keen about playing. I'm sure his head's bad. I hope he will let Dr. Norman overhaul him."

"Oh, you really needn't worry. He's tougher than he looks. One rubber can't hurt him."

Kaye's tone was frankly impatient. Her concern for the Colonel was a deft evasion; not like her a bit.

Just outside the tent loomed Thorne, obviously awaiting them.

Kaye halted.

Mrs. Vane, of necessity, followed suit.

"Promise you'll cut it and come for a stroll," he urged under his breath.

She sighed — and smiled. "Oh, very well — you're the most persistent — obstinate —"

She broke off. Challoner, approaching from behind, was almost upon them. He looked shrewdly from one to the other, smiled at Kaye, and passed on.

If Mrs. Vane had her faults, she usually kept her promises. In spite of lamentations from Thorne and a half-hearted assent from Challoner — which troubled her more — she held her

ground and moved off beside her captor out of the lamplight into the starlit dusk.

As usual, directly he had her alone, the passionate words that tumbled over one another in his brain either meanly deserted him or refused to be uttered. The whole thing had been so swift and unsteady. To be premature might simply lay him open to a rebuff.

It was she who spoke first: a trivial chance, but such trivialities are often cardinal.

"Well — now I'm here," she said in her coolest tones, "what is this urgent business that must be 'fixed up,' even at the risk of giving poor Colonel Challoner another bad night?"

It was not the sort of remark to pave the way for a fervent declaration.

"Oh, it is only — I had to make a point of it, because you never give me an odd chance now. And what do *you* know about the Colonel's bad night?"

"I happened to come on him this morning fast asleep under a tree. And, later on, we happened to speak of it. Does that satisfy you?"

Kaye detected — or imagined — faint mockery in her tone. "Well, he'll jolly well cut out if he wants to. *I* know the Colonel. The point is — Thorne's moving along on Thursday. What are we going to do about it? Have you any idea of going?"

She glanced at him sidelong and said very quietly: "It came over me, riding back, that the one thing I really crave is to go on with Captain Thorne and his doctor — to Leh."

"Good God!" Kaye exploded involuntarily. "I didn't mean — I'm awfully sorry . . ."

"You're not. You're awfully angry. For Heaven's sake, don't apologise. It's far worse than swearing! I believe Chris would jump at it."

"But — where do *I* come in?"

"Well — we'd be staying there a bit, to get Dr. Norman's escort back. I'm afraid you couldn't — could you?"

"No — *I* couldn't," he agreed with muffled rage. "You'd be quit of *me* — dithering round. That's a point to the good."

She turned on him briskly. "If you talk like that, I shall go back to the bridge table."

"Oh, very well. Much better fun for you, of course," he retorted, tingling with that exasperation of the blood common to men in his state. In the acute reaction of the moment, he almost hated her; he, who had set out with an ardent declaration on his lips.

They had come to a standstill. She did not answer at once. Then she shamed him with one of her sudden enchanting transitions.

"My dear boy — do be reasonable, even if you can't be polite. Of course, I'm talking impossibilities. I wouldn't dream of leaving you in the lurch, as you wouldn't need telling if you weren't in a state of — volcanic eruption."

"Well, whose fault is that?"

"Nature's fault, if you can call it so," she answered with a singular quietness. "Yours as well, if you will persist in mistaking the passing for the permanent. That's the great danger — especially at your age."

"*My age* — !" Resentment flared again; and her smile had its faint tinge of bitterness.

"Yes — it's a very nice age. Don't be annoyed with it! We've all got to be some sort of age. And it's no more discreditable to be twenty-three (is that it?) than to be — *thirty-five!*" She flung the last at him with her light touch of defiance. "But this isn't a committee on 'Dangerous Ages'! It was plans and programmes you were sternly demanding just now. And as my contribution's a wash-out, perhaps you can oblige?"

It was useless to gird at her deftness in turning a critical corner.

"Well, it struck me at dinner," he said, "that two or three weeks in and around Sonamarg would be a topping finale —"

"Then — the nether regions —"

"What'll you do, after —?"

"I wonder — Sit in a heap and cry my eyes out?"

"A backhanded way of telling me you don't care a bean."

The smothered pain, the lift of his head, moved her to a

softened tone. "Quite the contrary. I care — a good deal more than you deserve — after the way you've behaved to-night."

"Then why . . . Mrs. Vane —" he broke out desperately; but she gently warded him off.

"My dear boy, don't start on any more impossibilities. Sonamarg is the point. I think you've scored. We could annex a hut in case the rains take a fancy to break. Decidedly an inspiration. Chris will love it."

"Oh, rather," Kaye agreed gloomily. For the moment hope was extinct. Yet he knew very well that, upon the slightest encouragement, it would revive and torment him afresh.

"Don't break your heart over it!" Her eyes half atoned for her tactics. "How about persuading your Colonel Sahib to come, too? A triangle simply won't work."

"The Colonel!" Kaye's blank look and tone were scarcely complimentary. "Why the—? But his leave's practically up."

"If Dr. Norman's worth his salt he won't let that man go back to the plains just yet."

"But why should *you* want the Colonel? You hardly know him."

"My misfortune! He's obviously a man of brains and character, and I like men of brains and character. What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing's wrong." He could not confess to an insane, instinctive jealousy of her frank interest, or to a conviction that, with the Colonel's shrewd eye on him, he would never succeed in pulling it off. "Only — well, it's a young party. Isn't he a bit too old?"

"I'll tell him so!"

"You *won't* —" He was alarmed as well as dismayed.

"I *will* — if you don't invite him. It would do him the world's good. At a pinch, I'll ask him myself."

Worse and worse. He took refuge in his superior knowledge. "It wouldn't be any earthly. He's queer about women. Always manages to sheer off."

"So I've observed!" She seemed more amused than impressed. "But since he's managed to marry a woman, I refuse to regard him as a hopeless subject!"

"Oh, that's different. I mean — this sort of thing. I know him. Nothing would induce him . . ."

"You try!"

He shrugged resignedly. "Oh, I'll try — if you insist."

"And you'll play up? You'll do your best?"

Kaye flashed a withering look at her.

"I call that an insult — Hul-lo! Talk of the devil —"

Challoner's unmistakable figure was coming towards them.

"I call *that* an insult!" she said, very low.

Kaye surrendered the last word. She would have it in any case.

"Chucked 'em already, Colonel?" he called genially.

Challoner looked keenly from one to the other. "They've chucked me. I'm for bed. Doctor's orders!"

"Ill — are you?"

"Headache. A touch of fever. Sorry to interrupt you, but I was too addled to be any use; so they want you two. Don't worry." He smiled at the undisguised concern in Kaye's eyes.

"Good-night, old boy. Good-night, Mrs. Vane."

And he passed on, walking slowly, his shoulders a little bent.

"Oh, damn it all!" muttered Kaye under his breath: and Mrs. Vane tactfully pretended not to hear.

"That wife of his ought to come out at once and look after him," she remarked crisply as they turned to go.

Kaye nodded. "She's been Home a long time. I fancy there's a hitch somewhere. She rather bars India — my mother says."

"I thought as much," said Mrs. Vane to herself.

Loyalty to the Colonel restrained him from adding that his mother couldn't stand Mrs. Challoner at any price; that, in his opinion, she wasn't fit to tie the Colonel's boot-lace.

Mrs. Vane continued to say nothing; and Kaye had nothing more to say. To do him justice, he was not even thinking, just then, of his abortive proposal of marriage.

They walked briskly back to the bridge table without another word.

CHAPTER NINE

The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell.

MEREDITH

IN spite of leaden weariness, Challoner failed to sleep. His head was worse; his temperature high; though he had said nothing of either, lest Thorne deliver him to Dr. Norman. Undeniably, he was far from fit; but he wanted to be back at work again. His distaste for idling was a symptom of deeper trouble that he did not care to analyse.

At the bridge table he had played carelessly, with only half his mind on the game; and the Doctor, his partner, had showed signs of testiness over mistakes that looked like pure inattention. Challoner had excused himself on the plea of feeling stupid after a 'rotten night.' And instantly the man had changed his tone; had bidden him, with bluff good-humour to 'go straight to bed — and sleep like a babe.'

He had obeyed the first injunction with unusual promptness. He wished to Heaven he could obey the second with equal ease. But the more fatigue racked him, the more persistently sleep eluded him; advancing in waves of light-headed drowsiness to the very verge of unconsciousness; only to retreat again, dragging him back into the tumbled swirl of his thoughts . . .

The memory of Edyth's letter, dismissed during the day, returned derisively to embitter him afresh. Whole sentences came back word for word. He suspected her of influencing John in the matter of choosing a Home career. Somehow he had taken it for granted that his son would serve India. But after all — though John's indifference was galling — who could say, at the present rate, how things would be out here in five years' time?

Already the sometime advantages of an Indian career had been whittled down almost to vanishing point; while the penalties remained. It was startling to look back and realise how disastrously the whole atmosphere of the country had changed for the

worse since Edyth and he went Home in the spring of 1914. It had been disquieting enough then. Men on the spot had recognised — if those at Home did not — Lord Kitchener's stroke of genius in transferring an Indian army corps to France and filling the Punjab with British Territorials. At first it had looked as if the War might draw England and India closer together. But underground political forces in both countries had been working to very different ends. And, in India, from the upheaval of 1919 onward, the trail of the Montagu policy was over it all.

How far Edyth realised the effect of these cumulative disturbances on Anglo-Indian life — money apart — it was not easy to gather from her letters. One thing was certain. She hated the country. And to-night the horrid thought intruded — might he eventually be torn between the distracting alternatives of India without Edyth, or Edyth without India? Could that be the idea at the back of her tactics? By steadily refusing to come out, did she hope, at last, to force on him a step that she very well knew would knock the centre out of his life?

In his overwrought state, the thought maddened him. For in spite of all that politicians and agitators could do to make the country impossible, he loved his own corner of India and its peoples with a deeply ingrained love, not uncommon among Englishmen who have spent half a lifetime in their service. These, it may be, are the picked few; but they are the salt of her administration. And when the salt has lost its savour, wherewith shall it be salted?

At heart, he cherished a genuine affection for the intractable, sturdy tribes of the Border with whom he had worked and contended and fraternised for more than twenty years. Having borne the burden and heat of the day, could a man who, in secret, aimed at the highest, be expected to forego his chances of ultimate reward? A hint had already been dropped by a friend in the Simla Foreign Office that he might shortly look for special promotion. But how about Edyth? And what if it became a question of India — or Edyth? Edyth — or India?

Dear God! Why could he not sleep, instead of tossing and turning, while his thoughts ran round and round, like squirrels

in a cage—and garrulous squirrels at that. Proof that he hovered on the verge of delirium.

His fevered fancy evoked a shadowy illusion of her presence. He flung out a hand. His fingers closed on empty air. But the shadowy thing turned on him . . . and he knew it instantly—with an odd mingling of excitement and dismay—for the woman of his dream; the woman whose face had so instantaneously fired him; so completely vanished from his waking mind.

To-night his fever-clouded brain tricked him in another fashion. He knew her perfectly. It was her name he could not recall. The effort only maddened his throbbing head. It hovered distractingly on the edge of consciousness. It would come in a moment. It came . . .

“*Edyth!*” he called aloud; and the sound of his own voice startled him back to sanity.

The whole thing had gone from him, face and all, as completely as before . . .

It was late when he woke, with dragging reluctance, to find Faizullah at his bedside, respectfully announcing that breakfast had been served. Seeing that the Presence looked ill and slept heavily, he had taken word to Thorne Sahib—

“Oh, fool, and son of a fool!” was all the thanks he got; but, knowing the inflection of the Sahib’s voice, he was nothing dismayed.

Water was ready for washing and the kettle for making tea.

The Heaven-born graciously consented to wash and feed; and Faizullah had scarcely completed his good offices when the voice of Dr. Norman was heard outside the tent flap.

He had come at Thorne’s request, and Challoner, for all his bluff, was feeling too ill to do more than vaguely resent these summary proceedings.

Norman, having examined him at some length, told him bluntly, with a good Scots burr on his tongue, that he had only escaped concussion by the skin of his teeth.

“Or the thickness of my skull!” corrected Challoner, obstinately unimpressed.

"That's as you please, Colonel. Ye can take your choice of it," Norman conceded dryly. The legend that the Scot lacks humour is a libel on a great race. "Either way ye're quite unfit for hot-weather office work, with your heart a bit groggy and all."

He prescribed, in fact, another month of Kashmir, on sick-leave; a sweeping proposal that spurred Challoner to rebellion.

"Impossible, man! I've heavy arrears waiting. Some of them urgent."

"Bad luck for your 'locum' — who's no affair of mine. If ye won't listen to reason, ye'll be sorry for y'rself later on. Ye're a bit over five and twenty, Colonel. Consider your wife and family."

Challoner, having ruefully considered them, proceeded to bargain for half-measures. But Norman had not built his reputation on half-measures. If Challoner really felt fit before the month was up, Saunders, at Gulmarg, could be consulted on the subject.

"I'll wr-rite to him meself," he added with a cock of his turquoise blue eye. "And ye'll go easy, mind. Nine men out of ten 'ud be on their knees thanking me for that."

Challoner smiled. "I can't go on my knees; but I'm thanking you all right."

"Well, if ye obey my or-rders, ye'll have good reason to."

Stalking out of the tent, he almost charged into Kaye.

"You young fellows are so impetuous," he grumbled in response to Kaye's polite apology. "What's up now?"

"That's what I want to know," retorted Kaye, unabashed.

"Come along in, boy," called Challoner from the bed; and Dr. Norman, superfluously suffered him to obey.

"But don't get worrying yer uncle — or whatever he is!"

Kaye laughed. "I've not come to negotiate a loan. It's only an invitation!"

"If it happens to be a case of shinning up Nanga Parbat — !"

And the tyrant, shaking a lean, hairy fist at his victim, went off to speak his mind to Thorne. He had a talent that way.

"Sit down, old man — was that a polite fiction?" Challoner asked, to stave off questions.

Kaye obeyed; and, feeling suddenly nervous, went straight to

the point. "No! It's part of a plan — to finish up at Sonamarg. Mrs. Vane and Chris and I. And — you see, we want you to come and make it a foursome, if that old termagant's agreeable."

"That's very nice of 'we'! But I seem a trifle elderly for your party." (The frank admission hurt Kaye like a needle-prick.) "Also, I'm a trifle indisposed. That old termagant, as you respectfully call him, threatens me with dire penalties if I don't take a mild dose of sick-leave. It seems that fool of a tumble jarred my head a bit; and I had fever last night. I'm to go slow for two or three weeks."

"Then Sonamarg would fit like a glove!"

"It amounts to an inspiration. But — well, to be honest — I could do without the women. Also, as regards yourself — I don't quite understand the position."

That unexpected flank attack unhorsed Kaye.

"*C-Colonel!*" he stammered. "But I *told* you in my letter — " Challoner twinkled. "Did you? Very dense of me!"

"Well, anyway, now — you can see — "

Kaye felt he was bungling badly.

"I can see that you've run your head into a very tricky slip-knot on the plea of doing the lady a service. I'm not impugning your chivalrous motives, Kaye, but it strikes me Mrs. Vane is quite competent to look after her own reputation. Tell me, have you faced the cold fact that there must be twelve or thirteen years between you?"

"Oh, rather — she rubs it in."

"Sensible woman! Does that mean you've spoken . . . definitely?"

"She won't give me a chance."

"Well, then — chuck it, Kaye. Don't go making a blatant fool of yourself. She'll refuse you out of hand."

Tone and statement pricked Kaye's sensitive pride.

"That remains to be seen," he replied with a touch of hauteur.

"Well, if you won't listen to reason, I'd better join your party . . ."

"To try and put a spoke in my wheel," Kaye flung out irrepressibly. •

Challoner's straight look sobered him.

"Kaye, you forget yourself. If you're going to take it that way, I shall refuse out of hand."

Kaye's contrition was instant and sincere. "Colonel, you know I didn't mean it. It's only — why worry about me? Please come along. I promised Mrs. Vane . . . it was her idea. She saw you were ill . . ."

"Oh, confound Mrs. Vane! But you can thank her from me, for thinking of it."

"And you *will* come along? We'll all take it amiss if you cry off." He leaned forward, moved by an impulse to put a hand on the Colonel's arm. But he was shy of demonstration with one so undemonstrative. So he compromised with a hand on the edge of the bed. He had, of course, no idea how remarkably like his mother he looked at that moment. Association is a mysterious affair: the chance effect of a likeness has, before now, proved a turning-point of destiny.

Challoner frankly returned Kaye's smile. "Oh, well — if it amounts to a threat! I'll think it over. And I advise *you* to think things over, too. Try and see this affair — through your mother's eyes. Now cut along to your Durbar," he added briskly to prevent comment on his counsel. "Wish I could be there to see!"

"I wish you could!" Kaye tactfully followed his lead. "They're beginning to trail in now — *wazirs* and little *rajah-lōg* and *tehsildars* and *lumbadars* and *thanadars* and all the other 'dars'! We've got leave to look on — from a respectful distance." He rose to go. "Hope I've not worried you damnably, Colonel. You buck up, and come along to Sonamarg."

Departing, he carried with him the private conviction that, in spite of initial blundering, he honestly had done his best. And he fancied he had succeeded, into the bargain.

Challoner, left alone again, lay back on his pillow thinking it over to some purpose. That Mrs. Vane should trouble so to consider him — after his cavalier behaviour; that Kaye should press him to join them, for all his manifest dread of obstructions, moved him more deeply than he felt inclined to admit.

Norman would approve. And, for himself, Sonamarg was a shrine of dear and distant memories that could stir him still, yet had lost the power to hurt. There was also the off chance of doing Quita some service, merely by being on the spot; even if he took no active part in impending developments. The last stood first among reasons that made for acceptance of Mrs. Vane's surprising invitation, as Kaye had promptly divined. Would it be fair on the boy to join them with that end in view? Would it be fair on Quita to go off elsewhere and let things slide? Active obstruction was as foreign to his nature as fighting for his own hand. But one might as well get to know the woman. He had even arrived at admitting that she might prove worth knowing. It looked as if the 'pro's' had it. At least they had reason on their side, as against his lurking dread of boredom, and his vague, unreasoning alarm at so drastic a departure from his normal state of life in separation.

Lying there, inert and passive, he was aware how insidiously, resistlessly — in his own despite — the trend of things was edging him toward Sonamarg.

Well — why not? Why make a mountain out of a molehill?

And something deep down in him, some need he had not quite succeeded in crushing out of life, echoed persuasively, urgently, 'Why not' — ?

Without opening his eyes, he let out a slow breath of relief. He had made up his mind.

END OF PHASE ONE

PHASE TWO
ADVENTURE

PHASE TWO

ADVENTURE

CHAPTER ONE

*Where a woman's charm has won half the battle, her character
is an advancing standard and sings Victory.*

MEREDITH

"NEVER mind. He's bound to try it again. Catch him head downwards, if you can. It's a rare bit of luck getting him in the open."

Mrs. Vane spoke rapidly, under her breath to Challoner, standing at her elbow — his arm no longer in a sling. Her quarry of the moment was a black-headed babbler, practising gymnastic feats on the branch of a low-growing bush near by. He had, that moment, swung right round the twig without losing his hold; and Mrs. Vane had set her heart on recording this particular feat in her Kashmir journal of birds and flowers.

"We must just be patient," she whispered, "and we mustn't talk!"

Look and tone testified to their progress in intimacy; Challoner, with his half smile, settled himself on a moss-cushioned corner of rock; while she rested on the slope beside him, half turned away, ears and eyes preternaturally alert, as always, in these outings, that had come to be tacitly taken for granted, since they reached Sonamarg, ten days ago.

The distrustful Doctor Sahib had accompanied his patient over the Zoji-lá Pass; and double-marched back again to Thorne. Before leaving, he had spoken his mind to Mrs. Vane; seeing that 'the woman had a chin on her' and some grains of good sense under her 'flirty ways.' And 'the woman' — inured to masculine compliments — had peculiarly relished a practical one that gave her a kind of proprietary right over the man whose judgment of herself had been less complimentary and less shrewd.

Already Challoner looked and felt another being; and there was more in it than the breath of glaciers, or the redeeming virtues of idleness unalloyed. Here — in the enchanted quiet of the Golden Meadow — obstructions and antagonisms had evaporated. The familiar note in her voice, the atmosphere of her whole personality, eluded him no longer. It was Quita she recalled, in passing flashes; Quita grown young again, back in Kashmir. That exquisite illusion was the key to his haunting sense of having done it all before. Between-times, it vanished utterly; and Mrs. Vane became her quite distinctive and increasingly likeable self.

One could scarcely call her sympathetic. But she had the insight of the artist, quickened by the intimate understanding of those who have suffered. Give her birds, or her violin, for company, and all her flinty, egotistical elements vanished utterly. On the fiddle, she was a past-mistress. Urged by Kaye, she had played to them one night at Kargil; an experience Challoner would not soon forget. It had left him wondering . . . *can* this be the same woman . . . ?

She was listening, now, to the intermittent trillings of an unseen bird: and her very stillness deflected his attention from the graceful babbler, who — after rustling and chirping in the undergrowth — was back at his tricks again.

There must be no failure this time . . . Click.

She glanced round without moving.

“Got him?”

“Got him!”

“Well done! You’re becoming quite a marksman!”

She turned altogether now, and watched him slip the camera back into its case — noting, incidentally, how the hands reveal the man. She would have chosen this man out of a crowd by the shape and movement of his hands alone: long sinewy hands with their unmistakable stamp of race and breeding.

“You may be relieved to hear that — for the moment — I’m satisfied! It’s been a great tramp. We’ll light up and take a breather a little farther on, for a good view of the glaciers.”

They wandered a little farther on; the Sind River, three hun-

dred feet below, swirling and thundering past jutting rocks, shaggy with moss and fern. On the far side, seven thousand feet clear above the Marg, sprang the precipices and jagged summits of the sentinel Grey Peaks, embracing in their hollows four glaciers that sprawled in sheets of sea-green ice to the verge of the restless river. On the hither side, forest and meadow and flowers had it all their own way; flowers everywhere — trailing in creepers, burgeoning on bushes, springing bravely from crannies and massed boulders, wherever seed might fall or root strike down.

Rocks and stones, by the water's edge, were bright with forget-me-nots in their thousands; and the two-mile sweep of open glade shelved to the forest's edge in a sheet of yellow balsams and vetches, ragwort and Rose-of-Sharon — cloth of gold, to which the Marg owes its name. Beside the path sprang larkspurs and columbines; and at intervals a whiff of faint, clean fragrance told them wild roses were blossoming somewhere, out of sight.

For Challoner their fragrance had no rival on earth. It was more than mere scent of flowers. It was the ghost of his own vanished youth, at its high, passionate moment of efflorescence. It disturbed him vaguely — even while it charmed him — this unbidden revival of the past: stirred in him a secret breath of renewal; an imperceptible quickening of forces and emotions, repressed, yet still potent, at the zenith of manhood. For once, metaphorically, he was riding with a slackened rein . . .

As for Kaye — since Kargil, the boy had not said another word; and his own resolve to speak out had gone the way of most resolves that run counter to temperament. Tackling Mrs. Vane herself might be the sounder move. But it was a matter so delicate, so personal, that — in his passing mood of indolence — he found himself waiting for a lead.

The younger ones, grown restless, had gone off yesterday, at dawn, for a little mild shooting higher up the valley. The *shikari* — one of Challoner's many old friends — had promised *chikor* and a chance of *monál* pheasants up a neighbouring *nullah*.

Two days would suffice. Challoner, in his idle mood, had voted for staying behind on guard; secretly not averse to spending two days alone.

But Mrs. Vane would not hear of it. Having been put in charge, her place was with her 'patient.' Besides, she could not bear shooting birds. His faint demurrings, on the score of Chris and Kaye, had been airily overruled. Why shouldn't they go all the same? They were a level-headed pair; and the *shikari*, one of the old school, who believed in Sahibs and chuckled sceptically over reforms.

It seemed they were both keen. Challoner had seen no point in raising difficulties: and the past two days had been flawless. Undeniably, she had a genius for men. She knew how to be there; yet never too conspicuously there: how to be just often enough not there to make her presence always welcome — 'an excellent thing in woman.'

Argosies of purple cloud, big with the coming monsoon, had been shipwrecked on the higher peaks, with shiver of lightning and mutter of thunder, leaving their Eden uninvaded. They had dined by moonlight, under the pines. Then he had demanded music; and she had given him of her best — serenely, impetuously, eerily, as the spirit moved her; while he lay smoking, in a luxury of content, not troubling to applaud; at peace with himself and the world for that one hour, if no more.

The discovery of her genius for music had gone far to quicken intimacy; to reveal the real woman. Into it she flung a passion of the spirit, a strain of the wild, a beating of wings — wounded, but not broken by the obstructiveness of life — that clashed arrestingly with her shrewd, cool surface self. Blending with the scent of his pipe and the spell of moonbeams among the pines, it had invaded the secret places of his heart, and insidiously stirred the hidden strain of wildness in him that so nearly prevailed that night on the Kardang Pass . . .

This morning they had set out early, with food in a haversack, and had been tramping on and off all day: — up through the forest belt of pine and sycamore and rhododendron, to the outer

fringe of silver birches, most dauntless, most spiritual of trees. If she had it all her own way with the birds, he distanced her easily when it came to intimate knowledge of trees, and India's inexhaustible mine of tree-legends and tree-lore. A satisfying sense of having excelled himself was present with him, as he walked beside her in a companionable silence.

In nothing had he wronged her more than in writing her down a clever chatterbox. Speech, it seemed, was her way of concealment; silence her way of revealing; a way that suited him down to the ground. He was aware of feeling vaguely reluctant to return, vaguely regretful that their solitary two days were over . . .

She halted suddenly and faced him.

"That bit of bank looks inviting. Let's sit and refresh before we descend to earth."

They sat and refreshed, while a grey-winged blackbird hymned the oncoming of evening from the topmost twig of a young sycamore, as if he would hurl at the impassive peaks and glaciers over the way the sentient, quivering fragment of life that he was; life at its zenith in the zenith of the year.

For several minutes they listened in silence. Then Mrs. Vane turned suddenly and their eyes met.

"Hear him! He's positively triumphing over those dead masses of rock and ice; flinging his heart in their faces! And they, poor things, aren't even aware of him. Blind, deaf and dumb, for all their unchanging splendour —"

"There is one glory of a blackbird and another glory of a glacier," said Challoner very quietly, shifting his gaze to the hills. "If the eternal snows *are* deaf and dumb, what matter? They communicate direct. 'There is neither speech nor language, but their voices are heard among them' — if one has ears to hear —"

He broke off, suddenly shy of himself and her. She had some property — like a diviner's rod — that reached the well-springs of his secret thoughts and drew them out into the light. He turned on her a look, half humorous, half combative.

"It's *your* fault! *Why* do you make me talk like this?"

"Do I — ?" Her pleasure was evident. "Well — why not?"

One gets so sick of the small change offered by most men to most women. It's a tribute, once in a way, to be offered a bit of minted gold."

That was the kind of remark Challoner could not cope with. So he said nothing. But their eyes encountered with a little tingling shock that startled him and was gone in a flash.

For several moments he continued to say nothing; and she sat there beside him, smoking tranquilly, listening to her bird.

Then — as if aware of his conflicting sensations — she remarked casually: "I wonder if the young ones are back yet? I hope they've enjoyed themselves as much as we have. I wish one could hope —" She checked herself, hesitated a perceptible instant; then, "If you will let me," she said in changed voice, "I would like to talk to you a little about — your Kaye."

Challoner started. Here was his lead; unwelcome at the moment, but not to be ignored. He took a long slow pull at his pipe.

"Thought he was threatening to become — *your* Kaye?"

"You didn't — seriously?"

There was an odd note in her voice.

"Well, it was evident he did — seriously."

"And you put all the blame on me?"

"Every ounce of it."

"Of course — you *would!*" She thrust out her chin with a touch of defiance — and it was Quita who sat there beside him, not Vanessa Vane. "I could feel you like a porcupine, with every bristle on end. Because Eve seduced Adam, woman's eternally the sinner. But as to Kaye — I assure you, Colonel Challoner, I didn't lift a finger." She paused and looked him in the eyes. "I've only my bare word to offer. Are you going to believe me? If not — we'll drop the subject."

"That's all right. We won't drop the subject.

The quiet significance of his tone brought a faint colour to her cheek. But she was coming to know his oddities by now; how he would hate one to emphasise a remark of that kind. And he — not without relief at her unexpected silence — went on: "Anything that concerns Kaye matters a good deal to me."

"Oh, *how* you must hate me!" she cried irrepressibly. "And he's such a fine fellow."

"Yes. He's all that."

She hesitated and glanced at his uncompromising profile, wondering whether frankness or a plausible semblance of it would best serve her turn. She decided on frankness.

"I know I behaved badly at Kargil. But I felt driven into a corner; and your antagonism put the finishing touch. Having properly shocked you, I vowed I'd twist you round my finger — *make* you —" She stopped abruptly, and reverted to her cigarette. "Oh, well — I needn't advertise my indiscretions wholesale! And to think," she added in her more normal manner, "that all *this* — sprang out of all *that!* Your prickliness and the failure of poor Kaye's shooting trip —"

"I'd like to hear more about that trip," Challoner interposed, seeing his chance. "If you didn't lift a finger — who did?"

She deliberately savoured the last few whiffs of her cigarette and flung it into space with a reckless gesture oddly unrelated to the trivial act.

"As to lifting fingers," she remarked to the unconcerned peaks across the river, "it's a more subtle process than it sounds, if you've never tried it on. I can't swear I didn't lift an eyelash! But to be honest, I must be outspoken. And I wasn't in the mood, just then — for obvious reasons. I was heartily sick of all that. Sick of men falling in love with me; sick to death of their hard core of selfishness masked by sentiment or passion —" She checked herself with an unsteady laugh. "*This* — to your face! I've been bottled up too long. I'm not safe when I let the cork fly off!"

"Don't mind me. Go on," he said quietly.

And she went on. "Of course, in a sense, it's a back-handed compliment. If I'd ever thought of you that way, I couldn't be talking to you like this —"

"Thank you."

"Not at all. The credit's yours," she retorted, with one of her likeable flashes of sincerity. "Most men seem incapable of making friends with me. And I've had no luck with women. So, you see . . . ?"

He saw the isolation of spirit implied; a form of isolation he knew too well. Egoist though she was, she had her excuses. And she had her points.

"You seem to have made friends with Miss Chamier," he tactfully shepherded her back to the main theme.

"Chris? Oh, yes — as far as one can, with a young girl. She's a jewel. And the irony of it was that she began it, poor dear, by taking a fancy to me, which 'vexed the righteous soul' of the 'Amiable Sham,' who promptly hit back after her kind."

"So I heard."

"From Kaye?"

"Yes."

"Oh, he made too much of it. The frump point of view is negligible nowadays. And I am used to being libelled. But I admit it did hurt . . . a little, just when — I'd got clear of things . . . at a price. How I *detest* the type! And the credit they get, for being 'good women,' holding the crumbling outworks of respectability! It wasn't as if *I'd* been the sinner. But, of course, they didn't really know a thing about — my marriage" — her voice dropped a tone — "except from gossip and the horrid publicity of divorce proceedings . . ."

He saw the closed hand on her knee tighten sharply. Allusions to her marriage bothered him, always. The better he came to know her, the less he could account for it. He wanted to hear more about that, too; but he could not very well say so.

"I suppose I was a fool to go there this year," she went on in a controlled voice. "But — I wasn't in the mood for my own society. In a way — I wanted my kind; just to breathe clean air and be harmlessly happy. And there was my racing business, too. But one's past indiscretions stick — like burrs! So — when those two produced their ingenuous plan, it looked like a gift from the blue; as if — for once — a good deed might be recorded to my credit. You see, I fancied — he was after Chris; and when they dumped Dick Chamier on to me, that settled it. At the start everything seemed idyllic. It was only when we got right away, I realised that Dick was after Chris, who was more than half in love with Kaye, who, by then, would

look at no one but me: — a Midsummer Night's Muddle, perverse enough to satisfy Puck himself! Of course, I was sorry for them, poor dears; but really I sometimes felt like eloping with my pet *shikari*, who, at least, could be trusted not to fall in love with me! Instead I virtuously annexed Dick, to ward off Kaye and give Chris a chance. But she either couldn't or wouldn't play up, And there we were, all of us — 'in the soup.'"

"And here you are, trying it on again!" Challoner commented with his twinkle.

"Well, Kaye made such a point of it. And Chris seemed keen . . ."

"Not much of a chance for Chris, with the counter-attraction handy."

"But they couldn't have gone off alone, could they? And" — a pause — "after this, the counter-attraction won't be handy. They'll be together in Peshawur. I'm remaining in Kashmir."

"Not going Home?"

"Not yet. Passage money, for one thing. Birds for another. I'm hoping a book may come of it. Of course, my fiddle would add a bit more to my income at Home; but I fancy one would feel lonelier in little crowded England than in the vast emptiness of India."

He nodded, and remained silent, considering, with natural masculine concern, her casual allusion to ways and means, realising vaguely that he was glad of her decision. But Kaye was their theme; and she only too prone to slip off it.

"Meantime," he reminded her, "here we all are; and the boy's nerves are getting on edge. He thinks I'm deliberately thwarting him — cultivating you, in fact, purely on his account. —"

"And the cap fits?"

"I leave it to you," he said, with his baffling gravity; "the point is — since you've been so admirably frank with me, can I persuade you to pay him the same compliment? Drop fencing — Deal him the clean wound. You'd be doing him a service — though he won't thank you for it."

"No, indeed! We shall have a bad quarter of an hour." Her sigh was not altogether for Kaye; her heart instinctively shelved

the painful necessity. "One was hoping it might be — if one could choke him off . . ."

"You've mistaken your man, Mrs. Vane. You won't 'choke off' the son of my old friend Lenox with cheap feminine manoeuvres."

His bluntness hurt her like a blow. He saw her stiffening — and hated himself.

"Forgive me," he said, in quite another tone.

She drew in her lip. "*You* can deal clean wounds. Disillusioned and demoralised I may be; but I'm still capable of honouring the rare, real thing when I meet it — the God within us, whom we dishonour at our *peril*."

The shaft — aimed at herself — smote Challoner as sharply as his own remark had smitten her. But silence might give a wrong impression and he could not risk hurting her again.

"Even when it can be truthfully said of us, 'They know not what they do?'" he queried gently.

"Yes, even then. Nature is inexorable. There is *no* mercy — none!" she cried out — such a passion of bitterness and conviction in her tone, that he half wished he had risked the wrong impression; half dreaded lest her self-control should give way. But almost at once he saw, with relief, that his fear was groundless.

"We are reared in crass ignorance or distorted knowledge of the most vital and volcanic element of our being," she went on in a low, contained voice. "Yet, if we stumble in the dark — we *pay* . . . to the uttermost farthing. It's a subject I can't trust myself to enlarge upon. Besides . . ." She tossed it from her with a gesture . . . "It strikes me that if we don't move on, we shall be late for dinner. And those two immaculate young people will be fancying I've run off with you in earnest!"

Her lightness — palpably assumed — had its old under-note of strain. But he saw it now, for the gallant thing it was, her rod and her staff, through the valley of shadows.

She rose abruptly; head erect, as one who confronts an enemy. "What a vast deal I've talked about your Kaye!" She indicated derisively the first joint of her little finger. "But I don't *think* —

you are going to misjudge me any more. And naturally, that was the point; the salvaging of *my* vanity, my precious ego; not poor Kaye and his feelings."

He rose also and stood beside her. "Nothing that either of us could say would alter them," said he, implicitly excusing her. "As to — the other . . . you have done me a greater honour than I deserve. I'm a bit of a bungler — with women. But I hope you can rely on me — after to-day, not to misjudge you again."

From Challoner, that was much: from her, it was even more that she simply turned and looked at him without a word.

CHAPTER TWO

*In her whole frame,
Have Nature all the name,
Art and ornament the shame.*

RICHARD CRASHAW

IF they were not actually late for dinner, they were late enough to perturb the immaculate young people — one of them in particular.

Kaye — having speeded up his own return — felt unreasonably aggrieved. And Chris, who knew all about the speeding-up — so ingenuously veiled, out of consideration for her — suffered an even sharper pang from the blank disappointment he could not conceal. But they carried off their awkward moment lightly. Where the emotions are involved, the young of to-day will sooner treat a mountain as a molehill than risk the reverse.

The obvious thing was — to go and change. And when Chris came out again, there was Kaye strolling to and fro with a cigarette, as casual as you please.

Dinner had been laid in the open, under a group of pines. The two flower vases stood empty; and Chris, glad of any mild occupation, filled them with Saint-John's-wort, keeping her back turned to Kaye. That done, she flung herself into a canvas chair, and opened a magazine haphazard, to distract her mind from his caged tiger prowl. But she knew all about it, in spite of her magazine. That he should go on and on that way, like a wound-up thing, hurt her unspeakably, not only for herself, but for him. Why, to goodness, should they keep up this play-acting farce that deceived nobody, just because he was a man who had changed his mind, and she was a girl, who had once hoped . . . ?

It was getting on her nerves.

He had just turned in his stride at her end. Down went the futile magazine; and she leaned forward with a desperate urgency.

"Kaye — wait a bit. Can you stop looking out for those two, just a few minutes . . . and listen to me?"

Kaye swung round, facing her. "I — looking out — ?"

"Oh, switch off! It's as plain as daylight." Her tone was impatient, but controlled. Her voice had its rich, contralto quality that made harshness or sharpness impossible to her. "You've stood up to it, these two days, like a man . . ."

"Chris! What rot! It's been simply ripping . . . I . . ."

"Kaye, do *listen*. I don't want any of that."

Elbows on her knees, she confronted him; very purposeful, very deliberate.

"You needn't suppose I'm blind to their patent little game — any more than you are. And we can't be natural or comfortable — can we? — with that sort of thing in the air. We can't shoot straight, or talk straight —"

"*You* can — anyway," Kaye muttered, in shamefaced confusion. "And *I'm* not playing anybody's little game. You jolly well must know by now that I — I think the world of you, Chris. If only *she* hadn't —"

The impulse to speak and risk being accepted was sudden and overwhelming. Clearly Chris had suspected . . . He felt a low-down cad . . .

But she was too quick. "Going to chance a proposal, are you?" she challenged him; her coolness every whit as gallant as a man's coolness under fire. "I wouldn't advise you to. You've no *right* to, as I see it. And, I warn you, I've got a bit of a temper. I've just told you — *I don't want* — any of that," she reiterated, a desperate note in her low voice. "Why can't we be friends, anyhow?"

"Goodness knows — I'd like to be," Kaye admitted with unguarded emphasis.

"Very well." She hesitated half a second — then deliberately burnt her boats. "Perhaps it would make things easier . . . if I told you straight that I wouldn't . . . accept you, at this moment, even if you went on your knees about it — old style!"

Before that audacious master-stroke, Kaye stood confounded. He wished to Heaven he could achieve the retort heroic, and go on his knees to her, straight away. Instead — there she was, off again, speaking a shade quicker than usual.

"Of course, I understand. . . you're sort of feeling you must play up, after the way we've been around together. But the point is . . ." — she waved off his attempt at interruption — "if I — absolve you, what matter the others? They'll probably take it, you've done the honourable, and been refused. And I *am* . . . refusing you — in advance to save you the trouble!" Her laugh was quite a creditable performance. And again she hurried on: "Knees and sentiment, and all that, may be out of date. But you can take it from me, I don't intend to marry without a reasonable dash of it — on both sides. It's not safe . . ."

"Is marriage *ever* safe?" Kaye jerked out unexpectedly.

She regarded him with gravely sympathetic concern.

"Did your father and mother come a cropper?"

"Rather not!" His chin went up — spurning the suggestion.

"Don't get huffed," she said gently. "You see, I've never reckoned *you* were a cynic."

"I'm not. I think it's simply a rotten state of mind. Are you?"

Her laugh came more easily this time. "Well, I wouldn't be tumbling over myself to admit it — after that! All the same —" She surveyed the sandal strap of her green kid shoe, with its pronounced high heel — her pet vanity, for ornamental wear; a futile effort to remedy her lack of inches. It was so unlike her in other ways. It had often puzzled Kaye — and attracted him, too — that endearing touch of human weakness grafted on to her essential strength. What was she boggling at now . . . ?

"Well?" he queried lightly, by way of helping her out.

"*Well* . . .!" She flung the word back at him, smouldering emotion in her tone. "*I know* it's a rotten state of mind. But still it's — you wouldn't believe how it rubs the guilt off things . . . knowing . . . there's money behind you; knowing all the men know it; seeing dollars in their eyes, plain as print, the minute they get keen . . ."

"Gospel truth, Chris," the boy cried, in dismay, "I've never given your money a thought."

"You suppose I don't know *that*?" Her eyes smiled on him

with unembarrassed candour; but her heart added privately, "Because you've never given me a thought . . . that way."

Aloud, she went on — partly to quiet his restlessness, partly for the relief of talking: "Honestly, I often get wishing it all at the bottom of the sea. I dare say I'd soon be ever so sorry for myself! But over where I come from, there's too much of it. A cousin in New York, simply made of money, was clamouring for me to join her and her international set. Paris and Monte and mixed love-making! Not much! So I rather jumped at Uncle Ned's invite — not knowing my amiable Aunt Amabel! Though I couldn't help suspecting . . . if there hadn't been my money . . . would they have been quite so keen? That's what I mean, the way it spoils things — inside you . . ."

Kaye's eyes were straying again toward the empty path.

"Sorry," she said, in a changed voice. "I'm boring you."

"Rather not. I was only wondering . . . could anything have gone wrong?"

Shebit her lip hard. "Don't you worry. They'll return intact. They've only gone too far, and forgotten about us." She hated hurting him; but it was Vanessa's fault. "He didn't seem to like her at first. But — with Vanessa — that's probably as dangerous as starting the other way —"

"Oh, the Colonel's all right." Kaye's tone had a touch of annoyance. "He's dead straight. Safe as a house —"

"I wasn't casting nasturtiums!" she apologised demurely. "But it's a question whether any man's safe with Vanessa, even if he's a Museum! Oughtn't you to lodge a protest — on principle? He's *your* godfather. You're responsible for him . . .!"

"You don't know the Colonel . . . Ah — there they are!"

"And no bones broken!" murmured Chris.

But Kaye no longer heeded her. He had hurried forward, shamelessly eager. They were shaking hands — those two. And Chris — trying to ignore an almost physical ache inside — was wondering why on earth she didn't hate Vanessa right out. There would at least be a certain primitive satisfaction about it. But the capacity for hating seemed to have been left out of her composition. At times, she felt positively annoyed with herself —

always making allowances, even for impossible people like Aunt Amabel. There were moments — thoroughly satisfying moments — when she very nearly hated Aunt Amabel. But Vanessa . . . ? One was tripped up, always, by the potent fact of her being Vanessa.

Only *why* had she cut in, just when things were going so swimmingly . . . ? Did she cut in, though? argued the annoying fragment of herself that always must see the other side. Who succumbed first to Vanessa's charm? Who lost her temper over Aunt Amabel's base insinuations and overflowed about it all to Kaye? Who positively dragged Vanessa into Kaye's orbit — not realising, never dreaming . . . ?

But Vanessa, even at thirty-five, still had all the gifts and graces; while she, Chris, had only her contemptible pile of dollars, her terrible capacity for 'caring,' and her wholesome distaste for the rootless life she had been condemned to lead ever since her strong, kindly father was snatched away from her, on the eve of the fatal Armistice.

That was the way Life let you down. Life never made allowances. And they had been such good friends; so happy together, since the long-ago days when they had been left alone. She loved the old place in Virginia; the garden and the big rambling house. But the more she loved it, the less she could endure the idea of going back to live there alone. Later on — perhaps . . .

At present, her supreme concern was for Kaye. If Vanessa really couldn't, or wouldn't, she ought to let him have it straight. Perhaps she didn't realise . . . ? And as she, Chris, had half let him in for it . . . perhaps it was up to her? . . .

They were coming nearer now. With an effort, she pulled herself out of her low chair. She ought to go and greet them. But it was Vanessa who came quickly forward — leaving the two men to cope with Larry's unbridled jubilations. It was Vanessa who took her by the shoulders and kissed her on both cheeks.

"Very bad of us, Christabel! But it was too lovely up there. I hope you and Kaye had a glorious time."

Chris screwed up her eyes: an engaging trick she had.

"We did our best! Sport was pretty fair, scenery sublime. We

only saw two *monáls*, and Kaye got them both — beauties. *You* look just splendid,” she added with conviction.

“I feel it! I also feel rather warm and dishevelled. And you’re so cool and spruce. Give me ten minutes, if you’re not starving. Hark at Larry! What a mercy we don’t all do that when we’re glad to see one another!”

Chris, left alone, stood watching the men who had called up the *shikari* — Vanessa being gone — and were inspecting his string of beautiful dead birds. Then her scattered thoughts flowed together again. Decidedly Vanessa was not in the mood to entertain awkward realities unawares. And Chris, being surcharged with them, felt it was clearly up to her . . .

With resolution in her heart, but without an idea what she intended to say, she made straight for Vanessa’s tent.

She found that dear and devastating person standing at her dressing-table in an open yellow silk wrapper, with a bold orange-and-brown design, her loosened hair hanging nearly to her waist, duskiy soft like a cloud.

“Well, what is it?” She turned briskly, brush in hand. “It isn’t — you haven’t —”

“Vanessa — how *can* you?” The ice was broken. No uncertainty now. The words came of themselves — as they can be trusted to do when sincere natures are sincerely moved. “You know — it’s not that. And it’s not fair on him — chucking me at his head, just because Colonel Challoner’s afraid of your charms, and you’re keen to edge him off on to anyone that’s handy.”

“Well, *upon* my word!” Vanessa regarded her almost as Balaam may have regarded his ass when it rebuked him in the way.

“It’s the truth,” Chris asserted, uncrushed.

“Not altogether, by any means. Colonel Challoner isn’t afraid of me — now.” (“She’s jolly pleased about something to-night,” thought Chris in parenthesis.) “And you must know I wouldn’t be edging Kaye off on to any stray girl. D’you think I don’t realise — ?”

“You don’t seem to — the way you’re going on —” She felt her colour rising, and it maddened her. “Making him simply feel

bound to ask me! I couldn't stand that. So I . . . I've squared things by — refusing him . . . in advance!”

Vanessa stared in frank amazement. “You owl of a girl! What folly!”

“Well, whose picnic was it? And what price my self-respect?” Her cheeks flamed now, unregarded. “I saw how it was bothering him, so that we couldn't — be friends. — But the real point is . . .” — she hurried on — “Vanessa . . . are you utterly certain? Is it bed-rock impossible — for Kaye, I mean?”

Vanessa's eyes opened a shade wider. “Which of you wants to know?”

“I do.”

“And you've the right, my dear,” Vanessa conceded in another tone. “It's absolutely bed-rock impossible. Don't look so dismayed, you sweet silly goose . . .”

“Then tell him so straight,” Chris valiantly cut her short. “And tell him to-night.”

Vanessa picked up her brush and began passing it over her hair. “But he hasn't even asked me. Rather overwhelming, poor fellow, being ‘refused in advance’ twice in one day.”

“You're utterly unfeeling! Of course he'll ask . . . the minute you give him a chance. He's all in a fever — seeing you again. And he'll never believe it's hopeless till you tell him — straight.”

“Well, I *will* tell him straight — *if* he asks. It'll hurt him badly. And I hope you'll all be satisfied. Now that's settled, I'd like to finish doing my hair.”

Without a word, the girl turned to go. And suddenly Vanessa held out her hand.

“Chris, don't hate me. Heaven knows I never meant to hurt you — or Kaye. And I'm bothered to death.”

The girl's hand closed vehemently on hers: then, obeying a sudden impulse, she kissed Vanessa's smooth, cool cheek — and moved quickly away.

Next moment, she stopped dead.

A masculine hand pushed aside the tent flap; a hand followed by Colonel Challoner's tall figure.

And he, too, stopped dead, staring at her like a half-awakened

sleeper — an instant only. Then his gaze passed beyond her to Vanessa, in her yellow wrapper, one hand clasping her loosened hair.

And she stood there looking back at him — motionless, a slow colour mounting in her pale face; for once not mistress of the situation.

"I — I beg your pardon," he jerked out, overcome with confusion. "I thought it was my tent . . ."

With a half-questioning glance, as if to assure himself she understood, he swung round abruptly — and was gone.

For several seconds Vanessa stood quite still staring at the tent flap; her heightened colour ebbing slowly, her ready tongue at a loss; facts more disturbing to Chris than the awkwardness of poor Colonel Challoner's intrusion.

Her smile, when it came, had its unmistakable hint of challenge.

"Poor dear! Did he startle you out of your wits?"

"Didn't he startle you?" Chris countered boldly.

But Vanessa was herself again. "Took my breath away for a second. But, of course, I saw what it was. An embarrassing variant of the *winds poche* that turned out to be an apricot in cream! And it upset him so needlessly . . ."

"He must have a goodish lot of bothers on his mind to get like that," mused Chris.

"I fancy he has. I'll ease him of one to-night. I suppose you realise," she added crisply, "that it will probably smash up our picnic. And I've been — loving it."

"So have I. But, truly, Vanessa, it isn't fair."

Vanessa sighed, and glanced at her own image. "You're a venatoriously Puritanical young woman! And I'll be a remarkably clever one if I pull it off without upsetting our apple-cart! Meantime, I really *would* appreciate being allowed to do my hair."

And Chris departed — increasingly puzzled and troubled all round.

Even the satisfaction of having gained her point was damped by the horrid possibility that had not entered her head. Hope or no hope, she simply wanted to be with Kaye. Perhaps — he

would feel like that about Vanessa? It was a hope tintured with bitterness.

There was no sign of him outside. Fancy if he had seen Colonel Challoner leaving the tent . . .!

It *had* startled Vanessa — that little accident — however neatly she turned it off. A vivid impression remained of the colour creeping into Vanessa's face and a fleeting look in her eyes that she, Chris, had never seen there before.

Vanessa — was it possible! . . .

CHAPTER THREE

*The troubles of our proud and angry dust
Are from eternity, and shall not fail;
Bear them we can — and if we can, we must;
Shoulder the sky, my lad, and drink your ale.*

A. E. HOUSMAN

To the ironic spirit that misgoverns human destinies all things are possible — as Vanessa Vane had intimate reason to know: and the inner sincerity she so prized had the merit of saving her from the snare of self-deception. At a pinch, she could lie to others without scruple; those ‘others’ who had so often been her natural enemies. A lie to her own heart was, for her, the last indignity. Constrained to live for years in an atmosphere tinctured with falsity, that cherished inner standard had preserved the frail and vital fabric of her self-respect.

And to-night she admitted without excuse or gloss the full extent of her dilemma.

Challoner had captured her interest at sight: the spare, clean-cut look of him, his air of distinction, the quizzical, whimsical smile that lightened in his eyes an appreciable moment before the lips followed suit.

His very shyness and antagonism had surprisingly assailed her, on that first night of meeting; for all she had laughed at herself — she, Vanessa, the invulnerable . . . ! And the shock of finding him married had been a distinct score for the shrewd, disillusioned Vanessa who guarded the doorway to her heart.

When interest deepened, unmistakably, she had hailed him as that rare thing, a man of mentality, capable of making friends with her — if she could keep her head. As for him — his marriage alone gave an illusion of safety; and the very ‘Scottyness’ of him made assurance doubly sure. She had never encountered a man who seemed so little alive to the potent fact that she was a woman. His eyes, when they lost their brooding look, had an almost frosty gleam in the clear grey-green iris; and the latent force

of the spirit behind them was like a breath of strong air from the hills. From the first, that inner aloofness had piqued her vanity and intrigued her interest; and now . . . now . . .

The time at Kargil and the first week at Sonamarg had brought her nearer true happiness than she had ever been before: happiness quickened, rather, by an under-sense of walking, emotionally, on tiptoe. But these brief days alone with him had revealed, too clearly, the tremendous, incredible thing that had shattered her hard-won peace of mind. Had she not already realised it, the effect of his sudden appearance in her tent would have enlightened her in a flash.

To-night she had no vital concern for anything but the newborn Vanessa. And to-night — of all nights — they must needs be pestering her — he and Chris — to pin her attention on Kaye . . .

Swiftly and deftly she made a coronal of her hair; enhancing the effect with her Chinese comb, and slipped into her yellow tea-gown, mentally rehearsing the fatal scene. Not that, even now, she felt bound to force an opportunity; but she would not evade it, if it came her way.

Throughout dinner, conversation was spasmodic. Colonel Challoner, withdrawn into his 'ivory tower,' seemed unusually abstracted. Chris — having spoken to some purpose before dinner — had apparently no more to say. The task of bridging chasms of silence fell mainly on herself and Kaye, who talked jerkily and at random, chiefly of birds and sport.

When the women had smoked a cigarette apiece, Chris rose with a casual air: murmured of chilliness, and went off to fetch a scarf. Vanessa, looking after her, felt sceptical about that scarf.

Presently she rose also, without pretext, and wandered across the marg, leaving the men to their walnuts and wine. She wanted a breathing-space, a respite from make-believe; and there was more than respite in the noble view across the way, where a half-moon, brightening every moment, silvered the foam of the river, and the main glacier in the east . . .

Very soon she was aware of someone approaching her. Kaye —

inevitably. Pity contracted her heart; yet something checked the kindly impulse to turn and make things easier for him.

And all in a moment, the unmistakable whiff of a pipe, the authentic stir in her veins told her — it was not Kaye.

“What is the secret of moonlight?” she said softly, forcing herself to utter any available platitude, because she was afraid of her own silence. “A little new, of the ever-old? Isn’t it a blessing — considering one’s natural capacity for boredom — that life *does* hold a few supreme sensations one never wearies of?”

“My goodness — yes!”

The note of repressed fervour surprised her out of preoccupation with her own feelings. She hoped he might say more if she kept quiet. But he simply stood there, taking slow pulls at his pipe, lost in thought, or in the arresting beauty of the scene. If only she dared try and reach him — dared let him guess! A sudden flame of rebellion leapt in her. What conceivable use was it to anyone — all the fine flower of emotion dammed up in hundreds of human hearts, thrust in upon itself; no outlet, no hope of fruition . . .

At that moment he turned to her, almost eagerly.

“Mrs. Vane — *have* you ever been up to Gangabal — the sacred lake under Haramokh?”

“Me? No — what’s the connection? Had you slipped all those miles away?”

He nodded. “Incurable, I’m afraid!”

She saw in his eyes a remembrance of his lapse before dinner; feared, for one instant, he would speak of it; and knew — in less than an instant — that her fear was groundless.

“Watching the moon over there reminded me how I saw it three years ago on the Haramokh glaciers — And I was thinking how much I would like to see it again . . . while I am in this region . . . if you would care —”

“*Care?*” Her eyes dilated. “Could we really do it from here?”

“Yes — if you and Miss Chamier are game to foot it — four fairly stiff marches, each one over a high pass — I’ll do myself the honour of making it my show.”

Instinctively she cloaked her own eagerness.

“In defiance of Dr. Norman and a stalwart Scots ally at Gulgarm?”

“Norman and his ally may go to — !” He snapped his fingers with a deep, chuckling laugh. “It’ll make a new man of me. The usual way is through the Wangat Nullah. But, if you happen to share my weakness for mountain lakes, you won’t quarrel with my upland route.”

She sighed; marvelling what price the unsleeping gods would exact for these three weeks of paradise. “It sounds too good to be true.”

“You’ve only to say the word.”

“But” — the inescapable ‘but’ — “how about Kaye? If I give him his *jawab*¹ — as I’m virtuously pledged to do — isn’t it on the cards he’ll go off at a tangent and upset everything?”

“M — I forgot that. But getting a move on to Gangabal might ease things a little. Kaye has these mountains in his blood. His father was a noted explorer. He’s not been beyond their ante-chamber yet. We can but try. And men *have* been known” — he glanced sidelong, with his twinkle — “to persist in the face of half a dozen *jawab*s!”

“Oh-h, poor me!”

“Poor Kaye!” he gravely reminded her. “It’s a cruel kindness. But there it is. Better get it over. I’m booked for Home letters; the heavens would fall, if the mail brought nothing for Eve!”

“Is she — your special pet?”

“M.” He compressed his lips a moment, but his eyes gave him away. “She’s the one I happen to know best. And I haven’t seen *her* for six years.”

The schooled quiet of his tone and the characteristic understatement made her heart ache for him. How about that wife whom he so rarely mentioned? To-night the thought of her was almost unendurable, as she watched him move away toward the camp table and hurricane lamp awaiting him just outside his tent.

Chris was back again, smoking another cigarette with Kaye. They both rose at Vanessa’s approach; and she — feeling purpose

¹ Answer.

in the air — launched into a rattle of desultory talk; perfectly aware that Chris would abscond on the first reasonable opportunity.

And she did.

Vanessa, abandoned to Kaye, was idiotically reminded of being left alone with the dentist, on the one heroic occasion when she had faced having a tooth extracted without gas. The more seriousness was required of her, the more fatally she was upset by these unseemly intrusions of the ludicrous: while he sat there, explosively silent, grinding a cigarette end into his saucer, as if his life hung on reducing it to shreds.

He must have felt her watching him; for he looked up suddenly, meeting her eyes; not troubling to hide the adoration in his own.

"I'm in luck," he said, "getting you to myself like this. Shall we — stroll a bit, if you're not played out, too?"

"No. Not quite! We took it easily."

"You *did*! I thought you were never coming! And we didn't. You see . . . I was keen . . ."

"And you let Chris see it, too?"

"Oh, I don't think so —"

Drawing a deep breath, he rose and walked beside her, away from the dinner table, across the open glade; deliberately making for the bend in the path that would hide them from view.

"All the same," she rallied him lightly, "I would bet any money it was as obvious as this flood of moonlight we're wading through. For thorough-paced callousness — commend me to a man in love!"

The last word struck a spark from him. "*There* — you've said it! You know I'm crazed about you. But you push me away. You won't let me speak . . ."

"My dear Kaye — where's the *use*, when I've nothing to give you . . . but pain?" She turned on him, her hands flung out in an expressive gesture of emptiness. "I've done all I can to show you — without jabbing it at you."

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned, clenching his hand and half turning from her. "Am I such a hopeless rotter?"

His tragic dismay moved her to lay a hand on his arm.

"Quite the contrary. You are one of the most charming and admirable young men I've ever met." She felt him quiver under her touch, and her praise. "But, to be honest, I simply couldn't tolerate a husband years younger than myself; any more than I would dream of letting you squander your youth on a woman twelve years older, and a battered married woman into the bargain. . . ."

"For God's sake," he implored her in a smothered voice, "don't talk like that — to me." They were round the bend by now; and, impulsively seizing her hand, he pressed it hard against his lips. "Whatever there's been before, the *real* you is simply untouched. You've the freshness of the morning on you —"

"And you've the soul of a poet in you!" She capped him, to hide the disturbing effect of his lightning intuition and his young, impassioned kiss. "But in ten years' time, when you'd be thirty-three, you wouldn't find much freshness of the morning about forty-five . . ."

"Oh, *do* let your age alone!" — The desperate ring in his voice told her the steel-pointed shaft of reason had struck home — "It's altogether beside the point."

"Yes, altogether," she agreed gently. "Because I simply *couldn't*, Kaye — in any case."

"Is there — another fellow?"

The eternal lover's question! And his second direct hit. But she had herself in hand. "Really — that's entirely my own affair."

"Then — I shall go on hoping."

"No. You'll be a man and do your best to leave off hoping — leave off caring —"

"Leave off seeing and breathing — ! What the devil would there be left to live for?" he flung out with a bitterness so foreign to him that it cut her to the heart. "I wish to God my leave was up. I'd sooner go straight back to Peshawur."

"And spoil everything — for us all?" She emphasised the question incisively; concern for herself intruding on genuine concern for him. "Colonel Challoner wouldn't stay here — alone

with us. And it's doing him the world's good. He's planning to finish with a trip up to Gangabal. Wouldn't you like that — being on the move again — seeing those wonderful glacier lakes — ?”

“Oh, yes, it would have been ripping,” he agreed without enthusiasm. “But *now* —” He took a stride nearer the edge of the marg. “I'd rather — go clean over there — and be done with it all —”

She moved swiftly to him, and caught at his arm.

“I won't have you talk like that! You're far too plucky . . .”

“I don't know about pluck,” he muttered, looking down at the welter of foam and swirling water. Even her touch seemed unable to penetrate the numbing effect of his pain. “I'd probably funk it, when it came to the point. I — oh —” His voice broke. He turned abruptly away. “You've given me the knock. There's no more to say . . .”

It was true. Her words had dealt him a wound no word of hers could heal. Yet it seemed cruel leaving him so . . .

And suddenly — welcome as a light in a fog — came the thought of Colonel Challoner. She, being a woman — *the* woman — was powerless. He, being a man — knowing the boy and loving him — might find the right word.

“Kaye — my dear, don't break your heart over it,” she urged, addressing his back and the slow heave of his shoulders. “It's hateful — hurting you so — leaving you so.”

He could neither answer nor look round. That she should suspect his tears was bad enough; that she should see them seemed the last indignity.

But, as she turned and walked quickly away, she knew he had turned and taken a few steps after her.

“Vanessa!” he called out, in spite of himself. It was the first time he had spoken her name; and the sound of it stirred her strangely. But it seemed wiser, kinder, to pretend she had not heard.

Once round the bend, she came in view of the little camp clustered about their hut — all silent and pallid, in the moonlight.

But she had eyes for one corner of it only, where Colonel Challoner still sat outside his tent in the yellowish gleam of his lamp, writing, writing—leisurely, ceaselessly—to which of them?

Instinctively she halted, glad of a chance to watch him at ease; forgetful, for the moment, of Kaye and his pain.

He sat leaning forward, in his favourite attitude, an elbow on the table, the knuckles of his closed hand pressed against his temple. Being over-tall, and the table too low for him, his bowed shoulders had an air of despondency that might or might not emanate from within. Part of his face was in shadow, but the lamplight caught the slope of his high forehead and the odd grey streak in his hair that retreated on either side, making corners; the decisive bridge of his nose and the bar across his gold-rimmed *pince-nez* that emphasised the strong line of his eyebrows.

Gazing her fill, she was smitten with a sudden access of tenderness, such as comes over us in watching one we love doing some ordinary trivial thing, all unaware of being observed. And in her the well-springs of tenderness had been dried up these—how many years? Fascinated, irresistibly, she watched him remove his ‘nippers,’ take out a silk handkerchief, polish each glass in turn, and settle them with meticulous care at exactly the desired angle on his nose. It was a purely mechanical action; yet the inexplicable thrill of it awoke her to her senses—and she remembered Kaye.

The instant she moved, though her steps were soundless, he seemed aware of her. He looked up, with lowered head, over the rim of his glasses; removed them; laid down his pipe, and was on his feet when she reached him.

“Where’s the boy?” he asked anxiously, his eyes searching her face.

“Oh, I *had* to leave him. I could do nothing with him. Go to him, please. He’ll listen to you—I never thought he would take it so hard—”

The tears started and she drew in her lip.

“You’ve done it—effectually. A horrid job,” he said, a quite unusual note of sympathy in his deep voice. “It’s a bitter busi-

ness, the way we seem forced to hurt one another — men and women. It was good of you — taking the first chance —”

“I hated it — simply hated it,” she confessed, scarcely daring to trust her voice.

“But you pulled it off — *well done!*” To her utter surprise, elation, and consternation, he put his hand on her shoulder. “It’s upset you . . . I don’t wonder —”

“Oh, never mind me,” she murmured, distractingly alive to the feel of his hand through her thin silk gown — “Go to *him* —”

“Yes — yes. I’ll do what I can.” His fingers lightly pressed her shoulder. “Good-night.”

“Good-night,” she said, forcing herself to meet his eyes that were full of kindness; neither sceptical nor critical any more.

Then, pocketing his pipe, he walked away from her with his long, deliberate stride; and she remained standing there, unable to shift her gaze from him, till the bend in the path hid him from view.

All these years her capacity for deep emotion had lain dead in her; a fountain sealed. To-night the ice was broken, the floods let loose. To-night — for the first time, almost — her courage faltered. She was afraid . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

*There liveth not in my life any more
The hope that others have. Nor will I tell
The lie to my own heart, that aught is well,
Or shall be well . . . Yet, O, to dream were sweet!*

(*Trojan Women*) EURIPIDES

SLEEP was out of the question; and the night itself too full of mysterious light and shadow and stillness to be exchanged for a stuffy tent. On such a night, an impulse amounted to a command.

Beyond the camp and up the moonlit slope, Vanessa wandered almost to the forest's edge; hoping to still, by mechanical movement, the disturbance wrought in her by his heartening word of praise and that utterly unexpected touch of his hand. Sensations and emotions she had read of, and dismissed as gross overstatements, seemed pallid things by comparison with her present tormented yet exalted state of being. She, who a month ago was intoxicated with the strong new wine of freedom, had struck her flag at sight — unmasked, unwooed — to this end.

And there was no road out of her dilemma. No flattering visions, no impossible hopes of an ultimate far-off union, could ease — by one iota — this dull, dangerous pain of a mature, unsatisfied love. Nor could she draw moral support from righteous resolves to think no more of him, to avoid his society. She was too honest with herself for any such false pretences. And there need be no danger — for him. She knew how to take care of that, without relinquishing the gift of his friendship which she had legitimately won. It was her personal triumph. The sense of permanent reliance on it made her feel a shade less intolerably alone.

For the innermost Vanessa — as Kaye's insight divined — had remained through everything virtually untouched — also virtually starved. The natural woman's need of a mate for her whole diverse nature can remain as tragically unfulfilled through

years of discordant marriage as through years of enforced singleness; and Vanessa Vane had suffered through that unfulfilment — no less than from the curse of the empty cradle — both in mind and body. She was too sane to have any delusion on that score. And because of that knowledge she suffered the more keenly now . . .

Without definite plan or purpose, she wandered on and on; mysterious depths of the forest on one hand; on the other a deluge of moonlight and the far-off rush of the river.

And as weariness began to weigh upon her limbs, a curious lightness invaded her brain; a sense of aloofness from all outward things except the wonderful, actual scene through which she moved. The snows and the glaciers were her fellow spirits in loneliness; the moonlight almost a caress. Even the stars, that blinked unconcernedly down on her through a million miles of dark, distilled a faint, chilling consolation — cold as midnight dew: a disembodied whisper that ‘the dream of the world is dream in dream’ . . .

If loneliness were bitter bread, solitude was wine of the gods. She had never spent a whole night out of doors alone. And there would be a peculiar fitness about it, this night of all others — birth-night of the new Vanessa; a creature of potentialities hitherto unrevealed. Her baptism should be its dews, its moonlight, the soundless march of its disdainful stars.

Cautiously returning, for a rug and pillow, she was arrested by the murmur of a deep, unmistakable voice.

There they were, both of them in Colonel Challoner’s private circle of lamplight; Kaye sitting at the table, his head between his hands, Colonel Challoner standing by him, a hand on his shoulder — reasoning with him, no doubt — in a quiet, steady flow of speech, unusually prolonged for him.

When he paused a moment, Kaye looked up and smiled.

“Good old Colonel!” she heard him say; but his face was turned so directly towards her, that she retreated at once, lest her pale dress betray her. Besides . . . she had no business to overhear . . .

Emerging from her tent, wrapt in a long dark cloak, she

found 'drinks' in progress — and concluded that the odds were in favour of Gangabal.

Not far from camp, she settled herself among the springy underboughs of a young pine, half reclining so that she could look up at the handful of stars caught like fireflies in its higher branches. The brooding night seemed poised above her on motionless wings. Except for the muffled murmur of the river, earth was as still as heaven. Instinctively she caught herself listening for forest sounds; and was rewarded by the musical 'hoo-hoo-hoo — hoo' of the little brown owl. Two of them kept up a friendly argument from tree to tree; and she felt foolishly desolate when they flew away.

That passing chill of loneliness damped, a little, her ardour for moonlight and baptismal dews. It was a state of being horribly familiar to the earlier Vanessa; and it had been altogether in abeyance, the last few weeks. If isolation is the common fate of every soul born into a human body, the permeating sense of it is the curse or the privilege of the individual, imaginative few. And as far as she could remember, it had been with her always; puzzling, stimulating, crushing, according to events or moods, never more embittering than in this last decade of so-called wedded life.

Looking back across the years — considering, with a half-humorous, half-affectionate pity, those other Vanessas from whom this new one had sprung — she saw that it had been with her least noticeably in early girlhood before her mother's death.

Of those happier years, the chief impression that remained was an exciting sense of the instability of life. Never the same home for long together; often no home at all; just 'rooms' with nothing to beautify their irredeemable shabbiness and ugliness but her father's music and the unruffled calm of her mother's face, with a hint of sternness in the close-set lips.

For Haydn Valmont — a name not unknown in the world of art — had been that most unstable of earthly things, a musical genius — or half genius; a worse infliction for all concerned: charming, temperamental, invertebrate, alike in conscience and

character. Yet always there had been a vital, if precarious, feeling of 'togetherness' — they three.

And through it all, her mother had been the one stable element in their fluctuating fortunes. Unfailingly, unobtrusively, she had oiled their wheels of life. But it was her father who had fascinated her; spoilt her; taught her music when the mood was on, dropped her without compunction when the mood was off. And to his dearness had been added a touch of mystery; strange disappearances for many days; strange bouts of illness, when Vanessa was kept away from him; and naturally resented it. Not till the last days of her mother's last illness had she learnt the truth — that he was in danger of drinking away his very real gifts and his chances of success: a bitter, bewildering legacy for a girl of seventeen, left alone with the father she had devoutly loved, yet had never really known, as she was to know him henceforth, to her ultimate undoing.

The years that followed, drifting about Europe with him, were variously compact of new terrors and new delights; of strain and pain and the deep, incommunicable joy of perfecting her art.

In Paris, her father had won for himself a measure of the recognition that England denied him; and for a time his wife's death seemed to have steadied him. Then habit prevailed; and Vanessa knew he was slipping — slipping down the fatal incline. Certain ignominious episodes had spurred her to open protest. A streak of his own egotism in her made her resent them quite as much for herself as for him; an unexpected attitude, more salutary than his wife's phenomenal patience tinged with austerity.

That he could master the thing, if he chose, had been proved during the Sewell Hyatt phase; when they 'toured' Italy under the direct patronage of Mrs. Sewell Hyatt, and an attendant husband, who did not count. The woman was a devout hunter, with millions at her back and all time on her heavily ringed hands.

In the beginning, that phase of their chequered career had its good moments, its shining memories. To be less than nineteen; to see, for the first time, Italy, the Alps, Florence — favoured

by God and man; Venice, in her silver network of canals, dreaming between the hills and the sea . . .

And everywhere music, and more music; and the secret sense of the art she loved stirring within her like a live thing . . .

Then — the inevitable crash to earth . . .

The disillusioned Vanessa of to-day could smile at the remembrance. To Vanessa of nineteen — at the precarious moment of awakening womanhood — it had been no smiling matter to realise that the husband who did not count was discreetly, surreptitiously, making love to her, while complacent Mrs. Hyatt seemed to notice nothing whatever.

Instinctively, she had hesitated and manœuvred, till there came a point when she felt driven to seek counsel from her father — and the righteous anger she counted on had not been forthcoming. He had been irritated, merely, at the awkward circumstance; annoyed with Hyatt, scarcely less annoyed with her, for 'exaggerating trifles': unconsciously revealing himself to her as she had not clearly seen him yet; and leaving her, at last, fully awakened to the dismaying fact that, in respect of guidance and deeper understanding, she stood utterly alone.

Something had hardened in her then; and had gone on hardening, through years singularly barren of gentler influences; till at times there seemed only a morsel of ice where her heart of flesh should be.

In the end she had her way. The break had been a degrading affair of scenes and recriminations aggravated by the dim suspicion that her father had cherished a faint grievance against her as partly to blame. Yet, in the teeth of it all, her love for the best in him had prevailed.

At that time, she had privately dedicated herself to him and to her art, that now began to be a real asset. Unknown to him, men proposed and proposed again. She would have none of them. His compositions for violin and piano began more and more to attract attention; and for six years they had drifted about Europe together — wonderful years in their way . . .

Then the gods — having forgotten her for a time — began maliciously twitching the threads of her destiny.

It was in Paris, soon after her twenty-fourth birthday, that they chanced upon Robert Vane, a rising lawyer, home on a holiday from Bombay. Her father had foregathered with him at the bridge table, in the house of a mutual friend. Things had been going well with him of late. But he was in legal difficulties over a copyright infringement, largely due to his own unbusiness-like methods. In his expansive fashion, he had disburdened himself to his latest friend, hoping merely for legal advice; and had been overjoyed when Vane took up the case with zest and carried it to a triumphant issue.

And that had been the beginning of it all — of closer intimacy, and incessant card-playing; of seats at the opera, exciting times at Longchamps and the Grand Prix . . .

Looking back, it was strange to remember how she herself had found Bob good company, with his surface interest in music, his deeper knowledge of men and books, his mordant humour and talk about India, that had seized her imagination from the first. But when it came to an impassioned proposal, she had refused him out of hand, to her father's frank resentment and surprise. For Bob, with his accursed shrewdness, had allowed him to guess the truth and had received every encouragement in advance.

For a while, there had been no more theatres, no more flowers or *recherchés* dinners; and always in her father's lamentations there had lurked a hint of reproach. He had confessed to losses at cards, to money accommodations that must somehow be met. Then there was the great concerto, for violin and orchestra, that he counted on to establish his reputation. Vane had promised to relieve him of all business worries, all financial risk. Worse still, there was his former trouble threatening again; and it needed only a spell of discord and disheartenment to set him drifting down the old fatal incline.

Her dilemma had been Robert's opportunity. Nor was he the man to let it slip. One night — she did not know it then — he had got hold of her father, and plied him with tales of an infallible cure for his curse of drink; had offered to pay all expenses, if only he succeeded in winning over Vanessa.

And he had succeeded; though it had taken an 'all-night sitting' to achieve his end.

At least, she had been perfectly frank with them both. She had made no pretence of love. Her wander years had made her cynical on that score; and the secret lure of India had much to answer for. But Robert — once he had her in his arms — had complacently assured her it would only be a matter of time!

For a while, indeed, the success of the concerto and the cure had made her own sacrifice seem almost a little thing. And Robert had shamed her reluctance by a generous marriage settlement, coupled with an assurance that her father need never be in straits while he lived.

Then — at last — India; the vivid, varied, cheerful life of Bombay; the new delight of riding, of beautiful jewels and beautiful clothes. Little fault to find with the externals of life as Mrs. Robert Vane.

But she had married him in ignorance of the man he really was, and while he still hoped to win her, he had taken some pains not to let her guess the fundamental crookedness on which much of his life and his success was built. Only too soon she had divined it; and the suspicion of it had killed even her casual liking for him.

In the first place, she had suspected him of deliberately trading on her powers of attraction; utilising these to the disadvantage of the inexperienced young men who frequented his famous card-parties; eager to eat his food, to flirt with his wife, and — if luck would have it — to fleece from him a trifle of the money that seemed to fall into his hands whatever he touched. Whereas, in point of fact, the fleecing process seemed more often to be the other way about. Most often, it was gambling, pure and simple — poker, baccarat, chemin de fer; and, in spite of a haunting conviction that he did not always play straight, she could never detect him at it. He was far too clever for that. But the mere possibility — following on a series of galling incidents — had made her furiously angry. The whole position repelled and disgusted her. She felt degraded to the level of a third-rate 'heroine' in a penny novelette.

An evening of unusual 'luck,' and his frank chortling over the 'invincible Vane combine,' had precipitated the first outspoken scene between them: a scene that had stirred all the dregs of his nature. It had goaded her — almost — into throwing up everything and taking her chance again with her father, in the old roving life that seemed ideal by comparison with her present state. And it was only then that she realised how securely — through her love for him — Bob had her under his thumb. Yet it was good to remember that she *had* given him the fright of his life — if only for an hour.

That satisfaction over, there was nothing for it but to carry on again, keeping the true Vanessa under lock and key; while the false one played at being a hard, scintillating society woman, good to dance and ride with, dangerous to flirt with; played it so successfully that even her husband told himself, 'Vanessa was coming to her senses — at last.' (The fact that he persistently pronounced it 'Vernessa' maddened her more than many of his actual sins.) With the sporting instinct strong in her, she had so valiantly kept up appearances as almost to win the credit — or discredit — of being the thing she seemed. And she knew it.

Shortly after the Coronation Durbar, Vane had transferred his sphere of activity to the New Delhi, where events had precipitated a fresh crisis: and she had sat up half the night, inditing a long letter to her father, tearing the veil of illusion from his eyes, as he had torn it from hers. But the relief of self-expression had brought reaction. Before morning, all that remained of her letter was a little pile of ashes in the open grate.

"Not while he lives," had been her final decision. And in spite of herself the horrid thought crept in that he was not yet sixty; that, in any case, she would have to reckon with the trivial, formidable question of ways and means.

Her settlement went for nothing. Having thrown Bob over, she would not touch his money — whatever the law decreed. But could she subsist on modest royalties from her father's compositions, even if the name he had now definitely made outlasted his death? It was the sort of finicking problem that would foil a wretched woman at a really vital moment: and till it was

solved, her heroic decision was a cardboard and limelight affair. Ultimately, the solution had arrived unsought — as solutions will, if severely let alone.

A big 'scoop' one night at poker, an amazing run of luck during the Christmas week races: and there sprang the thought — "Here's my only chance! Why not?"

If it was hardly the way she would have chosen, it was the only way that offered. Strange to remember how Bob himself had unwittingly clinched matters by patting her on the back over it; advising her to 'invest the swag.' And his financial advice had always been worth having!

From that day, till the end came, the card-table and the race-course had become genuine. They became genuine fields of adventure. It was tragedy to lose; ecstasy to win. On the whole, she had kept her head; but there had been one or two desperate ventures when she had staked all, or nearly all — on a single issue — *and won*.

It was the success of those desperate ventures that had lured her into the larger field of speculating mildly in stocks and shares. Finally, she had even bought and raced her own pony, 'Con Amore'; and they had been familiar figures, she and her husband, at all the big meetings in the Punjab. Whatever her faults, the gods had not denied her courage. She thanked them for that. Even while the better part of her hated her desperate expedient, that secret purpose had given significance to her life, under its restless, frivolous surface; and a spice of excitement that kept her from flagging by the way.

At the end of three years, a son was born to her. For eleven months she had experienced a new and indelible sensation: but the look of her husband in the tiny face had strangely chilled and frightened her. And when the little life flickered out, she had said in her heart, 'Never again!' Latterly Bob had suspected the truth; and it had not made things easier, for either of them.

The news of her father's death had been sprung on her in half a dozen bald words: a wire from Home, telling her he was dead of heart failure. No details for weeks. That was India.

He had lately finished a cantata, which promised to be a really popular success. He had himself conducted the first London performance — and received an ovation. It was reaction from the nervous strain and excitement of his success that had killed him. In effect, he had died of joy; while her selfless, stoical mother had died of heart-break . . .

For herself, in spite of genuine grief, one thought prevailed. She was no longer at the mercy of things that happened; with all her strength she could happen to things.

As regards Robert, she had no qualms, and every justification for action. He had wearied, long since, of trying to win her, and had transferred his attentions to other women — who were not impervious to gifts of jewellery or the confidential settling of 'little bills.' In a sense it had been a relief; but the indignity of it —!

Now it was her main chance: and for once Fate favoured her.

An indiscreet woman had lost her head over him. The affair had become flagrantly obvious. On a certain night he had returned straight from her house, the worse for drink — an unusual lapse for him; and she had spoken out unreservedly, for the first time in many years.

There had been a violent scene — the beginning of the end . . .

The beginning of the beginning, rather, she corrected herself, shaking off those odious memories that night and solitude had brought crowding back to her mind.

And now — now it was over — that first exhilarating sense of freedom; of belonging utterly to herself — body and soul. Not the highest or the happiest state of being; but while it lasted, it had the live sparkle of all evanescent delights. Now the sparkle was clean gone out of it. The knowledge lay there within her, stagnant as ditch-water . . .

Seven months of freedom — and here she was captive again to those mysterious forces that Nature — for her own ends — has made so potent, so inescapable, whether they bear fruit or no. The difference was that now she loved her state of bondage. Whatever the outcome, it had wakened in her the most passion-

ate yet most exalted emotion she had ever known. It had quickened, almost intolerably, her individual sense of man's universal dilemma: the doom of inner loneliness; the craving for intimate union; strophe and antistrophe of the personal life. Was union, except in rarest instances, ever achieved? Was loneliness — even in the right sort of marriage — merely a matter of degree? Had Colonel Challoner's marriage been the right sort — originally?

Deliberately she called up and dwelt upon that vision of him in the lamplight, writing, writing — to which of them?

How little one knew of him, really — withdrawn as he was into his ivory tower of ironic detachment. Ironic, not cynical — instinctively she divined that. He had believed in life and love. But he had suffered disillusion; and the melancholy of his northern race had turned disenchantment to irony. Did that distant, disastrous wife of his genuinely care? Why had she left him alone for years?

Still holding her vision of him, her thoughts drifted and dissolved, utterly, and she fell into a light doze . . .

She awoke near morning, feeling cramped and chilled. The moon had set. The stars had brightened. Those that hung low above the hills, burned like altar lamps before a shrine. She lay there gazing up at them, half hypnotised by their unthinkable remoteness, till the invisible net of dawn drew them out of the sky and the tree-tops were stirred by a breeze of the new day, that would soon be here, with its wholesome, prosaic radiance; its call to action and insistence on the body's needs.

It was the first flutter and twitter of her birds that roused her completely to the fact that she was reclining out of doors, in cloak and tea-gown, at an hour sacred to privacy, dressing-gowns, and *chota hazri*. She dared not wait for the full awakening chorus.

Dared not? The sudden thought smote her, with a half-humorous pang, that never in her life had she felt afraid to face a man in the way that, unquestionably, she felt afraid to face Ian Challoner just then. The real thing would trip her up. Her trumpety art would avail her nothing. But she knew very well the fear

would pass. A little rest and renewal of her forces, then she would take up again the old hard habit of carrying on, hiding her troubles . . .

She rose hurriedly, gathering up rug and pillow. No stir among the tents as yet. From the servants' region a thin plume of smoke drifted up. Water was being heated, in empty kerosene tins, for baths and early tea. Hurrying across to her tent she discovered that, although the eastern sky was clear, the west was dark with a pall of ink-blue cloud moving steadily up against the wind.

In a few minutes she had slipped into her night things, and was comfortably settled down by the time Rani — her handsome Kashmiri ayah — crept in to see if her Memsahib had waked early and desired tea.

Her Memsahib desired it extravagantly. She had slept badly. She would not get up till tiffin time; and till then she wished to remain undisturbed. Let the Miss-Sahib be told.

With a blessed sense of relief, she snuggled down into her cool pillows, as the first sharp rattle of thunder announced the coming storm. From peak to peak it rolled like the mutter of distant artillery. Another echoing crash — and another. Not a drop of rain.

There is something sinister about a rainless storm; something tense and unrelieved, like tearless grief. But Vanessa had reached a point when nothing on earth could keep her awake: and she was sound asleep before the dry storm broke viciously, almost overhead.

CHAPTER FIVE

*God gives man seed,
Oft-times, for waste, as for his need.*

ROBERT HERRICK

“AFTER that pull, not another mile will I budge — for twenty minutes at least! One’s limited faculties need leisure to imbibe — all this.”

It was Vanessa — chin in air, alpenstock in hand, her sun helmet pushed back a little — standing at bay on the summit of the Nich Nai Pass; smiling frankly into the eyes of the man whom she had almost feared to face on the morning after her vigil at Sonamarg. But that was four days ago; and she had acquired, in a hard school, the knack of swift surface adaptation to any turn of the wheel.

He had told her nothing of his talk with Kaye, beyond the bare fact that she could reckon on him to play the man sooner than upset the whole show. And early yesterday morning they had left their enchanted valley, in light marching order. To-day, after an hour’s steady climb — mainly over snow — they were halfway to their second camping-ground, on the shores of Lake Vishn Sar.

The young ones supported Vanessa’s plea for a halt, if any plea were needed in view of the commanding scene that lay all about them — from nearer valleys, still in shadow, to a world of sovereign heights in full illumination; peaks and flowing curves, with their magical effect of arrested motion; beyond and again beyond, transparent in remoteness, against the misted blue of morning. The greater gods of the region had all heaven to themselves; and immediately above their Pass naked peaks of the Vishna Mountains towered stupendous.

Immediately below them, an erratic line of coolies and ponies straggled up the snow-slope to the summit; men and animals quaintly misshapen by angles of kerosene oil-tins, bedding-rolls like monster suet puddings, skeleton tables and chairs. Trailing

up onto the level, the pace slackened. It seemed the coolies also bargained for a halt.

Faizullah, approaching his master, respectfully begged to report there was trouble among them.

"They desire to return, Heaven-born. They say the spirits of these places are very much evil. They are complaining of pass poison from that cause."

"And you believe their fairy-tales — *you*, a Mussulman?" Challoner queried, a sceptical glint in his eye. "You can tell them, from me, if any man of them is taken with a sudden sickness, he had better be well again in five minutes, otherwise the djinns will certainly run off with his backsheesh."

"Rather brutal!" murmured Vanessa; and he flung her a quick look.

"Don't talk to the man at the wheel, if you want to get safe into port! How would you enjoy kicking your heels at Vishn Sar with no tents and no dinner?"

She retorted with a faint grimace; and Faizullah, suspecting her of sympathy, murmured, "It is an order, *Hazûr*. But they are in great fear."

"Well, if I hear any more of fear or sickness, I will come and reason with them myself. — That'll act as a nerve sedative," he added in English.

And it did.

Djinns who took liberties with backsheesh eclipsed all minor terrors. The cavalcade moved on down another interminable snow-slope, the wise Kashmiri ponies almost sitting on their haunches, while stalwart pony-men hung on to their tails, exchanging robust pleasantries that carried far in the thin air.

"Great is the power of the djinn, but greater the power of backsheesh!" Challoner paraphrased with a stern eye on Vanessa. "We'll let 'em have a fair start; keep the dust before the broom."

Their own descent, when he gave the word, was a lively affair: a drop of fifteen hundred feet from a height well over thirteen thousand — to one of those unfailing oases that Nature indulges in at high altitudes, as if out of haphazard consideration for man and beast.

Down and down, between ramparts of the Vishna Mountains and fantastic orange-coloured crags, to the upland meadow and their lakeside camp — three modest tents: the women sharing one, the men another; the third for such negligible hours and meals as could not be enjoyed out of doors.

It was a scene to banish weariness and lift the heart: a clear stream, grass and flowers, and herds of buffaloes grazing on the peaty pastures; and westward, framed in naked precipices, the lake itself — a mile of jade-green water, its colour intensified by snow-islands dropped from avalanche-cliffs above.

Here, once again, the air was full of larks; and Vanessa's quick ear caught the note of a goldfinch. But her first concern, tea being over, was to explore the tumbled masses of moraine for rare flowers. Her coveted trophy of the moment was the wild blue poppy; and Chris was carried off unresisting, in appearance, if not in fact. For Kaye had dug out his canvas and oil tubes; and what he might be painting was a matter of far greater moment to her obstinately loving heart.

Challoner stood beside him, while he made his dispositions, relishing the fragrance of new-lighted tobacco, and congratulated himself on having 'pulled it off,' by the skin of his teeth, that difficult evening. It was good to see how pluckily the boy was taking things. Already he looked better and happier.

Presently Mrs. Vane came racing back to them, waving her blue poppy, that must first be painted in her pocket-book, then scientifically pressed.

Kaye, looking up from his canvas, forgot all about the wonder of lake and moraine in the living wonder of her face.

"A perfect specimen! Hold it for me — will you?" — she appealed to Challoner — "while I try my luck."

Down she sat on a boulder close to Kaye, hopelessly deflecting his attention from his own difficult theme. Challoner accepted a camp-chair, insinuated by Faizullah. Chris had wandered off on a mild exploration of her own.

In less than ten minutes, with a small sound of impatience, Vanessa flung down her brush.

"Horrid thing. It's not my weapon! Kaye, be a man and an

artist, and come to my rescue. All the best sketches in my diary are yours."

Kaye, who was making no progress, promptly held out his hand for the book; and she was on the point of tearing out her own attempt when Challoner intervened.

"Don't destroy that little sketch. It's quite an artistic impression. I like it."

Surprised and keenly pleased, she felt her colour rising — the more so because Kaye's eyes were on her — while she detached the page with the tip of a penknife. Scribbling date and initials in the corner, she held it out to Challoner.

"If you've any use for the poor little thing — it's yours. Kaye's version will eclipse it — quite. So it can't stay in my book."

"Then it shall stay in mine — and welcome. Here you are, Kaye."

Handing over the poppy, he drew out the worn leather case that held Eve's letters; slipped off the elastic band, and inserted the sketch in his neat, meticulous fashion. And Vanessa, watching his hands, girlishly pleased at the unexpected incident, forgot all about Kaye, whose eyes never left her face.

When she turned to him again, he was busy with his poppy; and her murmur of praise did not move him to answer or look up.

Wondering what that might bode, she rose briskly and suggested a stroll before dinner. Challoner agreed; and they moved off together.

Kaye flung aside his sketch and looked after them — a half-dazed enlightenment in his eyes.

'Good God!' he thought — and leaned forward, his head between his hands.

Chris, bored with her lonely walk, saw it all afar off, and stood still in dismay. Dared she go on? Would he hate it? Shyness paralysed her, but stronger than shyness was the primal mother-impulse to comfort him — if one could. What on earth had that villain Vanessa done to him now?

So she went on again, taking care that he should hear her coming.

His perfunctory smile of greeting hurt badly. She sat down on Vanessa's boulder, but the words would not come; nor did she feel sure whether she could trust her voice.

Kaye said nothing. He was studying the blue poppy; and she allowed her gaze to linger on his abstracted profile; so near, yet so desperately remote. Then she took her courage in her hands.

"Kaye — what is it?" she asked softly. "Did Vanessa upset you?"

He frowned sharply, looking straight before him. "Mrs. Vane — why on earth —?" The unconscious humour of the question moved him to an abrupt laugh. "She's done about all she can in that line!"

Turning away from her, he picked up his half-finished painting and stared intently at it, because he had to look at something and he could not bear to look at her. But he was a poor actor; and his move gave Chris her cue.

"The lights are changing quickly," she ventured, leaning nearer. "Go on with it, Kaye. I can't help seeing something's upset you. It'll calm you down."

And she had her reward. He turned and looked at her in his old friendly way.

"Wonder you're not fed up with me! I — a pity not to finish it, anyhow."

He finished it, while she sat beside him in a confused turmoil of pity, rebellion, and content, not saying a word.

It did calm him down. It also gave him an idea. When it was finished, to the best of his ability, he fumbled nervously for a bit of paper, and scribbled in pencil, "Please keep this, if you care for it. Kaye." Then he wrapped it up, hesitated a second, and glanced at Chris.

"I'd be awfully grateful," he said awkwardly, "if you wouldn't mind . . . putting these . . . on her dressing-table."

The shock of his request almost unnerved her. "Vanessa — going to have that ripping picture, too?"

He looked at her again — differently, this time. "D'you like my smudge — really? Shall I have a splash at one for you?"

Which was infinitely more upsetting; but she came through

with credit: whereupon he routed out another canvas and started afresh. Clouds were massing in the west. The evening lights were impossibly beautiful. He wished he could have caught them for Vanessa. A ticklish job; but it was easier than talking. And it helped to distract his attention from those two.

They had wandered along the shore, and were sitting together; the Colonel on a slab of rock, leaning forward, his arms resting on his knees, Vanessa on the ground, her shoulder against the rock, looking up at him now and then, and talking — talking . . .

He would have given the world to hear what she was saying so earnestly, with her occasional upward look. She had never talked to *him* like that; which was no mere lover's spasm of jealousy, but the simple truth.

For Vanessa, on this particular evening, was moved by an irresistible impulse to break her self-imposed silence on the subject of her marriage; or, rather, as to the way in which it had come about. It was unendurable that he should credit her with having, apparently, loved Bob Vane — he who was not to misjudge her any more. If she withheld cardinal facts, how could he do otherwise? But it was not a subject one could drag in by the heels; and throughout all their wide-ranging discussions both had tacitly avoided marriage as a theme.

To-night, by chance, their talk turned upon choice — the eternal question of illusion or reality.

"Mainly illusion," was Challoner's verdict. "I wish I could believe otherwise. Take marriage, for instance —" He hesitated perceptibly. "We talk glibly of 'marriages arranged,' or 'choosing a mate'; but how often does any real element of choice enter in?"

It was too good an opening to let slip. The first few sentences were desperately hard to frame; but, once launched, the relief of it made things easier.

It was chiefly of her father she spoke — and her love for him; of the generous help her husband had offered him, at a critical juncture — and the price exacted from her. Of Robert, individually, she could not bring herself to say much; and she knew there was no need, that the man who sat beside her listening intently,

without question or comment, understood — so far as another being could do — what her life, thus mated, must have been.

She touched lightly on her gambling ventures, her 'nest-egg.' "Of course I gave myself rather a bad name that way — with the virtuous," she admitted, not looking at him. "It took hold of one like dram-drinking. But, at the time, I felt I would almost sell my soul . . . to be independent . . . afterwards . . ."

His vigorous nod conveyed more than understanding — approval. "Of course," he said. "I'm glad of it. I've wondered —"

And she, with a small pulse hammering in her temples: "I've wanted you to know. The virtuous may think what they please; call me a fast racing-woman and all that. What do *they* know of how it feels to gamble till your head spins, with your own destiny for the stakes . . ."

"And keep your chin in the air all the time?" he suggested, with a sidelong smile. (Was it her astonishing look of Quita, this evening, that so stirred him?)

"How do you know that?"

"By inference, merely."

"Thanks." Her smile deepened. She was too happy to be rigidly careful of looks and tones. "Well, if I did come through with my chin in the air, I owe it to no more heroic quality than my incorrigible sense of humour. Father used to say it would be my ruin. On the contrary, I believe it's been my salvation. Good Heavens! Where *should* we be without it — going through this vale of misery and using it for a well?" She was using her own gift of words for a screen, now. "Has it ever struck you how comparatively late in time the spirit of humour seems to have been born? Perhaps there came a moment when God ceased to feel quite so complacent about His crowning creature, as He did in Genesis, and by way of compensation handed us his last best gift — a sense of humour."

Her conceit moved Challoner to his half-reluctant smile. "To keep us, in spite of honest striving, secretly in love with imperfection — eh?"

"I'm in love with both! I would not barter my birthright in either for any heavenly mess of pottage. Would you?"

Still smiling, he held her gaze a moment, restive no longer under direct personal assaults.

“’M — no. I think not. It might depend on the precise heaviness of the pottage! It’s a bold man who would venture to prophesy what he would say or do at a critical moment.”

“That’s where the fun of the show comes in,” she sighed, reluctantly shifting her gaze from his face to the sunset sky that flamed through slats of purple cloud like a dying fire behind a grate.

Then, without any other word, she rose and stood away from him, afraid of her own emotion and of his too-friendly response. It was almost a relief to catch sight of Chris imperiously hailing them back to dinner — a very early function on the march.

CHAPTER SIX

*Oh, what is this that knows the road I came,
The flame turned cloud, the cloud returned to flame —
The lifted, shifted steeps and all the way?*

It was early in the following night — their last before Gangabal — that the Great Monsoon broke over their little camp in lightning and thunder and steel rods of rain. One crash had scarcely ceased reverberating from peak to peak, before another followed on its heels — as if the sky were full of rolling cannon balls. And at intervals malign streaks of lightning flickered through every uneven joint in their canvas shelters.

Sleep was almost impossible. Chris and Vanessa laid their burberries over their blankets, hitched up open umbrellas, to ward off invading spurts of rain, and sat in their twin camp-beds — listening. Not till the storm had rumbled away into infinity did they even lie down.

Then — tired out — they slept their fill: and woke late, to hear the deep voice of Faizullah outside their companion tent gravely announcing: “Sahib, the bath is ready. Heaven is clean.”

Heaven and earth were clean, to a marvel, when at last they set out to tackle the final Pass that would give them their first view of Haramokh; the women, in belted burberries, prepared for any caprice on the part of heaven, now the spell was broken.

Up out of the valley they climbed to a little wood of silver birches, whose drooping plumes, heavy with moisture, flickered rainbow-bright in the sun. Then out again, along a rolling upland meadow; far above river and forest and lake; above everything but the stern grey peaks and the snowfields, that lay like mantles on their rugged shoulders, and the snow-fed streams and immense white clouds like billows of cotton wool.

The storm-washed air, alive with larks, affected their spirits like draughts of sparkling wine. And flowers failed not, even at this height, to lure Vanessa off the track, and generally impede progress: gentian and dwarf delphinium, darkest blue;

and rose primulas, in vivid patches, the light behind them shining through their petals . . .

Soon the steady ascent began in earnest.

"It'll be stiffer going than you've had yet," Challoner warned the two women. "Most of the top under snow."

"Well, you won't be requisitioned to carry us!" Chris assured him — very sturdy and workman-like, armed with a formidable *knud*-stick. "We're not out for fancy slumming!"

"That's all right!" He surveyed her sturdiness with a quizzical air of relief. "It's going to be the real thing, I promise you."

And so it proved; and so the women proved also. With cheerful hardihood they plodded ceaselessly on and up, over snowfield after snowfield; over stretches of peaty marsh and tumbled boulder — worse than all. Above them the lazy white clouds sank low and lower, while surging mists in the valley rose higher and higher, till all their world was enveloped in a shifting, dripping shroud that clung in beads on the women's hair, on the men's moustaches, and the rough surface of their coats. And still they pressed upward by faith, not by sight; keeping in close touch with their guide — a more trustworthy specimen than he of the Kardang adventure.

"Are your local djinns trying to smother us in a damp feather bed?" Chris appealed to Challoner, as the mist thickened and settled, bringing them almost to a standstill.

It was the guide who answered her, pouncing on the solitary word he understood. "*Jee-hán*,¹ Miss-Sahib. Very bad mountain devils. Dangerous to make angry."

"They've never yet hindered a white man from going where he would," said Challoner. "Devils or no devils, we go forward. Hold hard, Kaye!" he shouted to the boy, who was pressing on cautiously, persistently — having, by a miracle, got Vanessa to himself.

"It's thinning up there, Colonel — look!" he called back, with a forward lunge of his *knud*-stick. "We can't be far off now."

"We're not. But don't get playing amateur pranks on your own. Keep in touch with Ramazán."

¹ Yes.

There was a note of command in Challoner's tone: but the heart of Kaye Lenox was crying out within him, "*This* is my country! Here I am at home!"

Turning to Vanessa, he flung out his left hand. "Come on, Mrs. Vane, it's all safe. Let's be first on the top."

His eagerness was infectious. "I'm for being first — wherever it is — even at the risk of a scolding from our C.O."

Spurning his proffered hand, she sprang forward and at her third step sank nearly thigh-deep into softened snow.

"Oh, good Lord!" cried Kaye — and had her by the wrists in a twinkling, without losing his own foothold. "My fault — but you really *must* keep to the track."

And his contrite concern was not eased by Challoner's shout from behind: "Look out there, Kaye! What the devil are you doing?"

The angry, imperative tone was new to her and hard on Kaye, who was really not to blame. He said nothing, however; only, with all his strength, he pulled her up onto firm ground and dusted the snow off her with a hand that shook just perceptibly.

"Never mind him, Kaye," she said gently. "We've won our scolding — and we'll be first in spite of it!"

She turned and waved her stick to reassure the others. Chris responded. Colonel Challoner gave no sign.

"Is he really annoyed?" she wondered, but pushed on, nevertheless, with all a woman's perverse delight in defying the one man she had ever felt disposed to obey; the more so because she had been stirred by that new note of anger in his voice; anger with Kaye — on her account.

• By now, the mist was thinning to a gossamer veil, through which the sun's disc shed a blurred radiance as if through ground glass. With every second, light increased; and they two stood watching, waiting; till imperceptibly the swaying veil dissolved — and behold Haramokh, the massive head and shoulders of him, snowfields and crown of rugged peaks, throned on eddying waves of mist — incredibly high; as if heaven were opened, rather than a fragment of earth disclosed.

Vanessa caught her breath and instinctively moved away from

her companion. Films of mist drifted, blotting out one peak and another: dissolved, lower down, revealing a gaunt rockface wreathed in foam. Every moment wrought some change, unveiled some new marvel . . .

And suddenly, without turning, she knew that he was standing beside her.

It took a few seconds to collect her scattered senses; and when she looked into his eyes, they held — or she fancied it — a hint of reproach.

“Did I frighten you? — I’m sorry,” she said on an underbreath. “It was my fault — really.”

The corners of his mouth twitched.

“I thought as much. But I could only swear at him. Perhaps I’d better take you in charge — for your safety and his. You’re a bit of a handful. And he’ll be losing his head again. He’s a persistent beggar. Look . . . *there*.”

Encroaching waves of mist, driven backward and dispersed, unveiled at last the whole stupendous view — the crown of peaks radiantly alight; the sun’s rays flung back, in a thousand broken prisms, from glaciers and ice-cliffs and the vast main snowfield — fit mantle for sacred Haramokh. The shining dome and cornices of the eastern peak rested on bare rock walls that fell, precipice on precipice, a clear three thousand feet to Gangabal, the lake of pilgrimage — in sight at last . . .

Far and still, a miracle of colour, it gleamed down there, three miles of turquoise-blue water, violet in shadow, flowing close under the glaciers that gave it birth.

Here, in a matchless setting, the Kashmiri pundit — despised by his brother of the plains — has instituted the most poetical burial rites conceived by man. To this high and lonely lake — where clouds gather and eagles scream and avalanches thunder all summer — the Hindus of Kashmir make yearly pilgrimage, carrying each, at the end of a stick, his precious rag bundle, packed with knuckle bones and other relics left over from the funeral pyre, to be committed, in all good faith, to the sacred waters of Mother Ganga at the supposed source of her being.

In point of cold fact, she rises endless miles away, above Hard-

war. But what matter the trifling error, or convenient fiction? For the pilgrim faith is all. And, for the imaginative, that spiritual significance — however fanciful — adds a spell of its own to the unsurpassed loveliness of Gangabal.

The sense of it was very present to Challoner as he stood there beside Vanessa Vane, in a prolonged silence that she had no desire to break.

Kaye and Chris, a few paces off, exchanged an occasional remark in low tones. And, behind them, Ramazán respectfully waited till it pleased the Sahibs to make an end of staring at the hills and the sky that, to his eyes, were looking much as usual.

It was Kaye who broke the spell of their silence — Kaye, untroubled by spiritual significances; all the Lenox in him eager for fresh heights to explore.

He moved suddenly nearer to Challoner. "Dad's been up there, I suppose?"

Challoner smiled. "You ask him! Haramokh had quite a personal fascination for him. Though the peaks look imposing from here, it's not a formidable undertaking, as great heights go. Yet the pious Kashmiri will tell you that fairyland lies up there; that, since the days of Father Adam, no human foot has trodden the snow of the summit. The Mahomedans have a tale that one of their fakirs managed to reach it, but he was pushed over that trifling precipice by demons, and smashed to pieces. The question of who lived to tell the tale doesn't appear to affect its authenticity!" He glanced again at Haramokh, and added casually, "I've climbed all but the eastern peak myself."

Kaye's eyes brightened. "Take me up next hot weather, Colonel. My first peak! Let's make a pact — we four — to repeat this ripping programme and finish up — *there!*" He flung out his stick, indicating the eastern peak, last and highest of all. "Shall we?"

"*Shall* we?" Challoner echoed, his smile tinged with melancholy. "This sort of thing doesn't repeat itself, Kaye. The Persians have a proverb that no man can bathe twice in the same spring or drink twice of the same cup of rapture. So drink your fill, now — and let next year look after itself."

Almost as he spoke, the shadow of a raven's wing seemed to brush across his face.

He jerked round, half expecting to see an actual bird; and found himself looking straight into Mrs. Vane's eyes. He smiled, for form's sake, hoping to goodness she had noticed nothing. A trifle of mountain giddiness, no doubt.

Vanessa, inevitably, had noticed something, though she could not have said what it was. While he spoke she had been thinking, in bitterness of heart: "Never again — for *me*. I would not dare."

Yet, when the time came for moving on, it was balm to note how unobtrusively, yet decisively, he took her in charge.

Once more it was a drop of fifteen hundred feet, the last dip in their see-saw journey; and all the way Haramokh went with them, eternally the same, yet eternally changing with each new angle of vision, with each cloud that drifted across the sun, each filmy scarf of mist that he gathered about him, hiding now one peak, now another from view.

At the outset Colonel Challoner was rather more talkative than usual. He seemed to know every legend of every peak in sight. And he spoke with deep personal affection of the country itself, rich in manifold possibilities, hardly yet tapped.

To-day, too, some obscure impulse moved him to speak more freely of his work; of his particular friend, the tiller of the soil, shrewd yet improvident, ground between the upper and nether millstones of official exaction and unofficial extortion; of the peculiar danger for India if she caught the industrial craze; of exciting episodes on tour in his Frontier district; of murder and loot, cholera and plague: but of the hot weather hardly a word. Men seldom care to speak or think of that blazing tunnel between spring and autumn, once they are out on the other side. Like the doom of constant separation from wife and children, it has to be pulled through somehow — and the less said the better. Outsiders, in consequence, hear too little about both.

Through it all, to her inner divining, ran the impression that, in a vital sense, he had been persistently alone; nor dared she too

closely investigate what that might bode. Every ounce of him seemed to have gone into his work.

And these were the men — she reflected, in a spasm of indignation — whom malignant agitators and weak-kneed concessions were automatically squeezing out of the country they understood and loved, in the practical, unsentimental fashion of their race. And at Home nobody understood either the country or the men who had welded its diverse fragments into the semblance of a whole.

After all, how should they understand? Men like Colonel Chaloner and his kind could not, if they would, coin small talk for English tea-parties from the one reality of their lives; from an Imperialism quite other than the Westminster product — a thing of blood and sinew, of danger and drudgery, of romance with all the bloom off, and any recognition, outside their immediate sphere, very far to seek. Words convey little. And the men who achieve rarely have the gift of tongues.

Yet here and now, to her great good fortune, this one man was talking to her freely, simply, of that sole reality — the country and his love for it and his work for it . . .

She found herself dreading the end of their walk, lest this unusual mood should not take him again, and womanlike she caught herself wondering — why to-day?

And if she had asked him he could not have told her. He was only aware of health and zest renewed — zest for life, as distinct from his abiding zest for work; of having reached the high-water mark of contentment for the first time in many years. Not that he was unconscious of the obvious link between that pleasant state of affairs and his friendship with Mrs. Vane; or of an instinctive reluctance to look beyond this shining interlude of good fellowship and renewal. Would she and Edyth, he wondered dubiously, ever make friends? He ought to try and speak of her more often — to pave the way. But the subject was so hedged about with reserves . . .

They had reached the valley now and were approaching the lake by a *détour*, through masses of tumbled rock hurled one

upon another by some vast upheaval. The forward view was blocked by them. In places great boulders stood high above their heads. In places the foothold was narrow and insecure. A solid bank of cloud had obscured the sun. The rattle of a hidden stream under the rocks seemed to intensify the mysterious gloom of the spot.

The others, some way on ahead, had passed out of sight. Challoner remembered a nasty bit round the corner. He mustn't let his mind go wool-gathering. They were close together; Mrs. Vane just ahead of him, lithe and sure-footed; a high rock wall on one hand, a drop to broken stones on the other. And suddenly there assailed him that curious sense of having done it all before; of almost knowing what was going to happen next.

A crash of falling stones behind them almost made him jump.

"What was that?" She swung round so quickly that her foot slipped. In a second she would have gone over.

But in that second he had dropped his stick and his arms were round her — taut yet trembling. She uttered no cry; but he could feel her heart leap and throb under his hand.

"I'm all right." She turned her face, smiling uncertainly. And at the meeting of their eyes, with her head so turned — he knew . . .

She was the woman of his dream.

The face that had haunted yet eluded him — was hers. His mysterious inner self had known her — yet not known her — even before their encounter in the flesh.

"Safe?" he asked with a catch in his breath.

"Safe!" she answered — too shaken, for the moment, to feel anything on earth but the hard almost painful pressure of his arms, as he pulled her unceremoniously back against the rock.

And instantly, independently, both were struck by the ironic quality of that particular word, at that particular moment.

As he released her, their hands met in a quick strong clasp; and the look in his eyes startled her — a sparkle, not of frost, but of flame.

"Be careful round the corner," he said. "It'll be easier after that."

When she ventured another look, he was his normal self again: cool, kindly, aloof; and she pulled her shaken nerves together with a jerk on the curb. Mercifully they were almost there. Normal talk was impossible; and he would detect the difference, if she simply talked for effect.

He, it seemed, had nothing to say. His happy mood of expansion had evaporated. Even when the path widened, he still walked a little behind her for some distance.

When at last the vision of Gangabal broke upon them, in clear, unclouded beauty, they looked at one another without a word.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Men's sins can take care of themselves. It is their innocent good deeds that start the hounds of destiny.

JOSEPH CONRAD

CHALLONER was alone at last; alone in the canvas shell of his tent. The women were resting after their strenuous march. Kaye had hurried off with his painting gear, to catch a fleeting effect of light and shadow on the lake.

Lying back in his camp-chair, he had leisure to face facts: to confront, with shame and dismay, the nature of his own sensations in that brief moment, when his arms were round her, when the lightning gleam of recognition tingled through his veins. To the poet and the Highlander in him, the fulfilling of his dream, with its eerie hint of prescience, gave a deeper significance to an episode he might otherwise have dismissed as mere 'nerves,' because a woman was in danger whom he had grown to love as a friend.

As things stood, all that was intrinsically honest in him spurned that comfortable delusion. He who had set out, with pure intent, to save Kaye from the snare of the fowler, had himself been caught in the toils. That was the plain English of it — decently veiled. But if God judges by a man's intention, He never deflects the logical sequence of the act.

That this desperate dilemma should have taken him un-awares . . . !

It was the fruit of these unnatural separations, these disturbing propinquities — the common curse of Indian conditions, aggravated by Edyth's talent for taking full advantage of them; his own distaste for pulling himself about inside, and the mental stimulant of Mrs. Vane's charm, that had insidiously penetrated his hidden shirt of mail. His inner life had been so schooled, these many years. For the last few weeks undeniably he *had* ridden with a loosened rein. Now, for that passing

pleasure, the gods exacted their price in this sudden uprush of commanding emotions and desires.

And there was nearly another week of it, marching down to the Wular Lake, where he and Kaye must leave the two women and descend into hell. His detached brain registered the fact with a curious blend of satisfaction and concern. No sense in blinking facts — or in making too much of them. Presently he would have himself in hand again and be able to carry on. It is a truism that what a man thinks and does habitually, he will think and do at a crisis; and Ian Challoner's inner defences were strengthened by generations of self-control that had gone to the making of him — the distinctive heritage of his race.

Infinitely wise — after the event — he saw clearly, now, the road he had travelled, unsuspecting, though mysteriously forewarned; saw, with a peculiar thrill, how — almost in the same setting — he had fallen in love with Quita over again — faithful to her type, even after twenty-two years. Yet, with the strange malignity of Fate, it was Edyth — little more than an attractive interlude — who had taken inalienable possession of his life.

The curious link between Quita and Vanessa held his thought. Again — there was the barrier; the hard choice between losing all, or transmuting passion into intimate friendship, for which women of that quality have a genius all their own.

Choice —? For him, there was none. On no conceivable account must *she* be deprived of the thing she had so ingratiatingly laid herself out to win. Since she seemed to value it, all he could give her, in the way of friendship, should be hers to the uttermost; his only to keep within the bounds beyond which it must not pass.

How far that brave conclusion was tinctured with sophistry, specious or instinctive, is a nice question for the psychologists. Challoner was a stranger to self-deception in the ordinary affairs of life: but the heart has its own fashion of reasoning; and its deepest secrets are hidden even from itself.

Right or wrong, such was his decision; and on the heels of it sprang another, hardly less momentous.

There must be an end, here and now, of Edyth's chronic

coquetting with her wifely duty. If he owed loyalty to her, she owed him common human consideration. After six years' absence, it was high time for her to become his wife again, in something more than name. Had she been out with him now, this sort of disaster would have been unthinkable. Not that he dreamed of laying it at her door. By some incalculable interplay of temperament, circumstance, and association, the thing had happened. His sole concern was to deal with it sanely, and as fairly as might be, for all concerned, not excluding himself.

It would need some tactical skill to revoke his tacit acquiescence in Edyth's latest graceful wobble. But to-morrow there would be leisure to think things out. Before starting, she — Mrs. Vane — had pleaded for a halt of two nights 'in paradise,' and he had agreed the more readily because it would facilitate the delivery of a '*dāk*.' For he was dealing with a certain amount of work through the post, having all his fingers on the strings. To-night he would sleep on his letter. To-morrow it should be written, while resolve was at white heat.

Later on, they all foregathered for tea; and Challoner — listening to their lively snatches of talk — found it hard to believe that the foundations of his inner world had been shaken only a few hours ago.

Their impertinent intrusion of camp-chairs and tea-tray fronted the immense northeastern buttress of Haramokh that overhangs Gangabal like a threat of doom. Here, above a grassy fan, gleamed sea-blue ice-cliffs, scored with terrible crevasses; there, dark slopes of rock and juniper were alive with fussy streams, splashing and tumbling into the placid lake — blue no longer, but the translucent green of Venetian glass. As at Vishn Sar, the shores were tumbled masses of moraine, bright with Alpine flowers; and all the peaty outlying soil was sheeted with the gold of big marsh buttercups. It was as if Nature had synchronised the whole range of her moods in perfecting the miracle that was Gangabal.

Vanessa, too eager to rest for long, had already been at work with her camera among the birds. Larks were dropping to their

· nests; along the shore flitted charming little white-capped red-starts; and yellow wag-tails walked delicately, like ladies in evening shoes.

Kaye had a half-finished picture to show for his spell of industry; and was keen to be at it again before the lights changed. But Chris murmured insinuatingly of an 'explore' among the streams up the rocky slope; and to Challoner's keen pleasure the boy assented with alacrity.

Left alone with Mrs. Vane, he no longer found it hard to believe what had happened. The haunting sense of his changed relation to her made speech of any kind amazingly difficult; and she, too, seemed beset with a passing self-consciousness; possibly only a reflection of his own. It was as if that accidental slip of her foot had thrust them miles apart.

The silence that threatened was not of the companionable kind. He forced himself to break it.

"D'you feel up to a walk along the lake — or did you tire yourself out running after birds?"

She smiled and rose briskly. "Gracious, no. Could one ever — in this magical air? I'll walk as far as you please."

The ice being broken, things became easier. Their mutual joy in the wild heart of Nature, in the rare conjunction of the 'time and the place and the loved one all together,' gradually assuaged the troubled under-sense in both; till once more they could talk or fall silent with almost equal ease.

For her, all beside was in abeyance. Mind, body, and heart were steeped in the spaciousness and the stillness and the sense of his presence, who moved and held her as no other had done, in all her days. And he did not know; and he must never know. Nor could she ever know the one truth about him that most supremely concerned herself. For all their mental unison, their emotional isolation was complete. Each independently — walking there, side by side — faced the tragic fact that it could never be otherwise between them . . .

For nearly two hours they wandered, alternately strolling and sitting; while lights shifted and shadows lengthened, and the waters of Gangabal, stirred by a faint surface vibration — that

shivered all reflections into vertical masses of light and shadow — passed, imperceptibly, through every conceivable shade of green: a slow-moving sequence of colour, like the strains of a solemn largo, on muted strings, audible to the attentive ear of the spirit. One lonely cloud, brooding over the water, intensified the mystery of cavelike shadows below. High above, an eagle hovered motionless on wide-spread wings; hovered, circled and swooped, with its fearsome scream . . .

They were resting, at the moment, on their way back to camp. The bird's discordant note shivered the stillness and the beauty, with its reminder of underlying harshness and cruelty, here as everywhere. It awoke Vanessa to the fact that she was sitting gracelessly silent beside the one man worth talking to, while minutes, that were beyond price, slipped through her fingers.

Sick of smothering her true self, she turned with one of her impulsive flashes of sincerity.

"Thank you — *thank* you, for bringing me here. It's the loveliest gift anyone has ever given me. I'll never forget it, while I live. The trouble is — one shrinks from dropping back to ordinary levels." Her gaze reverted to the lake. Her voice was barely audible. "So much simpler — to slip in there and escape . . . if there *is* escape . . . leaving one's mortal part in those green waters — a thank-offering on the altar of Hara-mokh . . ."

Challoner flung her a quick look. "If you get talking — thinking such things, I shall bitterly regret — my gift."

"No — *never* do that —" She forced herself to meet his level gaze. "I'd no business to. That eagle gave me a turn. I was hearing heavenly music — *There* he is again!"

There he was, high and solitary, black against a light-filled cloud, symbol of Fate that pounces unawares; — wheeling, hovering, and again swooping with his terrible cry.

She shivered. "Does it ever suddenly come over you that under the surface life's a howling wilderness; an orgy of egotism and evil passions; and we're all of us stranded in it — unutterably alone. When eagles scream in a scene like this, the feel of it jars all through one — and one turns coward."

“Not *you!*” The words slipped from him; and the conviction in his tone steadied her more effectually than his spoken reproof.

“Yes — me! But don’t be afraid! I only spoke my thought. It’s a relief, sometimes . . . to one who understands. A very real luxury.”

“A very real pleasure to me.”

The look she turned on him stirred him like a touch. “And I do my best to spoil it by dragging skeletons out of their cupboards and rattling subterranean bones . . . Promise I won’t do it again!”

Through the deepening glow and glory of sunset, they walked back to camp; Challoner so phenomenally silent that her heart was troubled with the lurking dread that, ghostlike, haunts the perfect moment.

During their brief early meal, they were all quieter than usual; all more or less under the spell of the place and the hour; while the vanishing sun filled the whole visible world with the splendour of his going.

As radiance dimmed and died, colour sprang from cloud-tip to cloud-tip; orange and flame-pink, deepening to rose. Glaciers and snow-peaks were alight with it. Their own faces, and the very tablecloth caught faint reflections of the greater glory. They were moved by a unanimous impulse to get away from tables and chairs and hovering servants.

Challoner sagely counselled fur coats; and they set out all together, toward the shore of the lake; Vanessa righteously resolved not to court the isolation she craved.

But the young ones soon outpaced them; and deliberately she halted by the rock where they had sat before returning to camp. She did not feel called upon to put aside the gift that came unsought. Besides, those two also had their own minor need to be alone.

“Not too cold to sit a little?” she asked. “I’ve a fancy to see her rise from here.”

Challoner, familiar with the scene from all angles, assured her he could not have chosen better himself.

“High praise from a man!” she said, drawing her coat close about her and smiling up at him.

“The highest from any self-respecting individual!” he answered, returning her smile, but not at once sitting down by her. The scene and the hour and their renewed isolation worked too potently in him.

Lest she make any comment, he proceeded very leisurely to manipulate his pipe.

The rosy afterglow had faded to a sheet of clear pale amethyst, the darkening peaks carved out of it like violet crystals. And the waters of Gangabal — responsive as a lover to the moods of the beloved — were violet also, with streaks and splashes of high light caught from the pale sky.

Northward, the mile-wide glacier loomed above the lake, a steely shimmer of blue-grey light and blue-black shadow. And high above its impressive bulk, ice-fields and *séracs* were piled one upon another, hemmed in by towering crags, black against the glow, that upheld between them the vast snow-mantle of Haramokh.

Already, the moon gave a hint of her coming. And suddenly, vividly, Challoner recalled the so-different hour when he last stood awaiting her — alone on the Kardang Pass. Just a month ago! Yet how many leagues had he travelled in spirit since then?

There it was again — eternally the same, yet eternally different — the thin rim of light struck sharp on the dark of the mountain . . .

And again he had the exquisite sense of isolation from the world of everyday; isolation, in this sanctuary of peace and grandeur, with her, who sat there lost in it all; her face framed in the yellow silk hood of their first awkward encounter; not an arm's length away from him, yet irrevocably out of reach.

The illusion had its moment of acute danger. It demolished barriers, rules, conventions, as spring dissolves the snows and precipitates the avalanche.

Here, in the untamed heart of Nature, all that was primitive in him assented to her large, careless view of the matter. In her eyes, they were simply man and woman — halves of a living whole; sundered only that they might seek reunion.

There was nothing intrinsically wrong in the deep natural desire that had sprung up in his unaccompanied heart: nothing essentially base in the natural craving for response — for possession. Yet, over against these simple-seeming impulses and fervours, hung the whole dead weight of human laws and prohibitions — religious, social, moral. Until a man came up against them, he was scarcely aware of their full restraining force.

Principle — honour — the words confronted him, steep and impassable as the main buttress of Haramokh. Were they, in the last resort, mere words, desperate expedients coined by man to help him keep his head erect and the brute in leash . . . ?

What if he sat down beside her now — took possession of her hands and spoke out all his troubled, dislocated thoughts . . . ?

Almost as if she heard his inner query, she looked up at him in simple wonder why he left her sitting there alone.

That dispelled his passing aberration. Deliberately he pulled his *posteen* together and sat down by her, with the altogether different intent of sharing her joy in this culminating hour of their pilgrimage.

And she, who had seemed lost in it all, was simply and unashamedly longing to feel his arms round her again . . .

The moon had blossomed by now, orange-yellow, immense, above the eastern peak; permeating the majestic scene with her strange radiance that neither reveals nor illumines, but transmutes mere earth and sky into a mystery of pearl-grey shimmer and impenetrable shadow. The spell of its ghostly stillness invaded them both; quieting insurgent emotions; making the passionate, human insistence on 'Me and Thee' seem a very little thing . . .

It was Vanessa who spoke first.

"The peace that passeth understanding," she said, very low. "Up here, one can almost believe in some sort of mystical union with the soul of Nature — if she has a soul?"

"Can you doubt it?" Challoner asked, in the same note, without shifting his gaze from Haramokh. "There must be, behind all this — Something that passes understanding . . . 'or we are of all men most miserable.'"

His emphasis on the last words made her turn and look at him. He was leaning forward in his favourite attitude; elbows on his knees, one closed hand pressed against his cheek. Though, in these few days, their intimacy had deepened, she had never so completely felt all barriers down between their minds: and it was much, even if human weakness craved more. On this plane they were free to meet.

"If only the will to believe could make one believe," she ventured, emboldened by his faintly remote air of absorption. "Faith is such a sensitive, elusive thing. At least, I find it so. And there is something so *enclosed* about the whole atmosphere of our churches. I don't mean only the four walls, and the poor distorted saints, and your neighbour's new hat hitting you in the eye. It's the feeling one gets of a live, winged thing cramped up in an iron-bound box, till its wings are crippled and its life nearly extinct. Christ went up into a mountain to pray. We — who call ourselves Christians — go into a stuffy, draughty church. It's the Hindu who follows his example, who seems to understand —"

Challoner shook his head. "Does he — I wonder? I should say he has simply the sure instinct of a mind not overlaid with book knowledge. Also — he is lucky enough to have the mountains. Our religion is a transplanted thing. His is growth of the soil."

"I never thought of that."

"I fancy it accounts for a good deal that makes ours sometimes seem a misfit. And the Hindu, at his best, believes what the orthodox Christian jibs at — that Nature and human nature are potentially divine."

"So he brings the bones of his dead all the way up here to lay them on her High Altar — and they become, for ever, a part of Haramokh."

Challoner smiled. "I doubt if they see or feel the poetry of it — as we do. But there's unconscious inspiration in the idea. I confess it would give me very real satisfaction to feel that, after death, the mortal part of me would be committed to those quiet waters."

"O-oh!" The low sound was involuntary. The idea of his mortality pierced too keenly.

"Does it seem to you — heathenish?" he asked, without turning.

"Me — ? Oh, no!" — Mercifully, he had quite misunderstood — "I envy them! How many thousands — millions — ? The air of this place must be full of departed souls."

"I shouldn't wonder." He hesitated perceptibly, and added in a lower voice: "If the free spirit is ever drawn to linger round earthly haunts . . . I am quite sure mine would find its way back to Gangabal."

His hushed tone, his half-averted face made her feel as if he were musing aloud. In any case, she had no words in which to answer him. Nor did he seem to expect an answer.

For him it was enough that, having almost involuntarily spoken his thought, he could trust her not to write him down a fanciful fool . . .

Presently, returning footsteps came out of the stillness and paused near their rock.

Chris, from behind, laid frozen fingers against Vanessa's cheek. "Feel them! They seem to say it's time to turn in."

Vanessa smiled up at her. She and Kaye, and all the world beside, seemed irrelevant unrealities — a hundred miles away. "Virtuous children!" she murmured mechanically.

But not until their steps had retreated some little distance did she force herself to make a move.

"As they've set us an example in wisdom — I suppose, we ought . . . ?" she said tentatively. "*I* could stay out here all night. But I'm afraid . . . there'd be a funeral in the morning!"

"And I didn't bring you here for that!" he reproved her, cloaking a reluctance that exceeded her own.

But it was he who stood up first — a shade more erect than usual. And as she rose also, the unearthly stillness was broken by a deep rumbling roar, away beyond Haramokh, that echoed and re-echoed among the hills.

She started and shivered.

"Only an avalanche," he said. "Very impressive, at night."

“Yes. But it sounded so angry — so ominous.”

The queer thing was that, at heart, she had actually felt afraid — horribly afraid — why, or of what, she had not the remotest idea . . .

Outside her tent they stood still, facing one another in the emptiness of that mysteriously illumined world. There was an instant of palpable hesitation, of suspended breath. Then: “Good-night,” he said — and held out his hand.

They had all, long since, dropped the formality. But this evening was not as other evenings. Whatever befell she would have accepted without question or amaze. She would have yielded, with rapture — with hardly a glimmer of surprise — if, instead, he had taken her in his arms.

Had he divined her inner tumult, the barriers might have been down, indeed.

But she stood there cool and composed in the moonlight; very dignified, in her long squirrel coat; and his fingers closed on hers with a slow, strong pressure. It was his mute pledge to her that by no weakness of his should she lose the thing she valued.

“Good-night,” she said softly. “I shall *never* forget.”

“Nor I,” he answered — and she was gone.

He stood alone, absently staring at her tent, absently noting trivial details of tent pegs and weather-stained canvas; marveling at all that could be compressed into a few uneventful hours of an ordinary-seeming day. Tea and dinner and a walk by the lake; sunset and moonrise; little of the personal element even in their talk. That was all. It was nothing. It was everything . . .

He lit his pipe again and paced to and fro, giving Kaye time to get to sleep. And long after that he went on pacing to and fro, to and fro, Kaye altogether forgotten . . .

At last he stood still again. He could no more. He was tired out.

The moon rode high now, and the lake that opened its secret heart to her was bathed in silver, stippled and splashed with ebony; the dark of the hills dead black against it; the hoary head of Haramokh crowned with stars.

He remained standing there, a moment or two, reluctant to turn in, though it was bitter cold, and he ached with weariness.

Cold and tired and alone with the mountains and the moonlight . . .

Quick and clear it all came back to him: the sense of fulfilment denied; the deeper sense as of invisible hands laid upon his restless spirit. And again, as then, he was still — he knew . . .

It was more than a memory; it was a reaffirmation of his ineffaceable moment on the Kardang Pass.

As he turned to enter his tent, there broke upon the stillness another roar, like muffled thunder, echoing and re-echoing among the hills . . .

END OF PHASE TWO

INTERLUDE

INTERLUDE

I

*Time and change estrange, estrange —
And now they have looked and seen us;
And we that were dear, we are all too near,
With the thick of the world between us.*

JEAN INGELOW

It was ten minutes to eight of a July morning. Edyth Challoner, from her nest of linen pillows, watched her trim little maid pull back the curtains from her triple set of windows that framed a long narrow strip of unclouded sky and unshadowed sea.

Two of the dwarf windows were open; and there had been a gap between the curtains, because a little fresh air was healthy, though early light was disturbing. Edyth Challoner, blest with a good digestion and a clear conscience, hardly ever woke a minute before she was called. Not even Tony — the all-privileged — was allowed in till eight. That gave her ten minutes to 'come awake'; for she was a creature of deliberate processes and she disliked being hurried. She also disliked waking too soon; and this morning she had been lying nearly ten minutes, watching the birds and flowers on her curtains, listening to the plash of lazy little waves on the sands:

For a wonder, the fact had not worried her. There were so many other matters to feel pleased about just now. They were having a glorious summer. She had let 'Bechwoods' and taken a bungalow on the Dorset coast, with Carl (née Carlotta Randal) her friend and devotee. The rent of these charming furnished bungalows among the sand dunes was positively sinful. But the lion's share of all their joint undertakings was paid by Carl Randal — a lonely, large-hearted woman of means, who had conceived an exaggerated admiration for her.

Edyth herself submitted rather than responded. At the present moment — owing to the bungalow and a motor launch and a touring car — Carl was in high favour. Being an active verb, if

an irregular one, her infatuation expressed itself mainly in a lavish zeal for giving and serving that, in vigorous natures, is apt to become an inverted form of tyranny.

There were times when Mrs. Challoner wearied of it. But in her own fashion she was genuinely fond of Carl. She was also innately lazy; glad to have the wheels of life oiled for her by any obliging being who had a taste that way. It had always been one of Ian's good points; and, failing him, she had graciously transferred the coveted honour to Carl. She was of those who tacitly accept as their due the love and service of others. If, at times, she regretted her husband's increasing absorption in his work, it had never entered her head that the keeping of love demands more subtle skill than the winning of it. With the coming of children, her own centre of interest had shifted; and all the minor subtleties of attraction had ceased to operate.

In a measure she recognised this; saw it as inevitable. If your husband gave you children, what else could he expect? The fact that she had remained over-long with hers, had dropped into the habit of Carl, and formed an intimate friendship with Hensley Harrison, journalist and lecturer, in no way affected her placid, assured feeling for the man who made all these things possible: or so she believed, which perhaps amounts to the same thing. She never analysed matters, or clearly defined them to herself; for so one stumbles upon awkward truths.

She had already spent six radiant weeks in the little bungalow — she and Tony and Carl. It had been sunshine and bathing and motoring all the way. This afternoon Mr. Harrison was coming down for his frequent week-end. Beryl and Eve were home already. John would arrive at tea-time — and her cup of content would be full . . .

The maid had brought in the tray with Tony's banana and letters. The top envelope had an Indian stamp. She liked imbibing her tea and her letters in peace.

But the door had hardly closed before it opened again, to admit Carl in her straight-cut dressing-gown, sponge-bag and towel on one arm, a tasselled trailing girdle behind. Her short, rusty-brown hair was tinged with grey; her complexion innocent of

face creams; for the rest, a blunt, assertive nose; small eyes of very bright blue, and a capacious smile. Edyth greeted her perfunctorily. She was rather bored with these early morning intrusions, especially when Carl appeared too soon.

She had committed that cardinal error this morning, and she knew it the moment her lively eyes encountered Edyth's grey ones, well shaped and well set under indeterminate brows. Nothing dismayed, she sat down on the edge of the bed, dropping towel and sponge-bag on the floor.

"Bit previous, am I, old darling? I saw Lily come out, and I knew Tony wouldn't be in."

If Edyth's response was negligible, she looked pleasing enough to atone for a good deal, in her pink silk jacket that set off to admiration her white throat, her well-cared-for complexion and deceptively tender lips. Her light brown hair, that hung in a thick plait over one shoulder, dropped on each side of her forehead in big loose waves that were not the gift of Nature, but the gift of Carl, who had insisted — and had also paid.

"Stifling, last night," she remarked, as Edyth apparently had nothing to say. "Hope you slept?"

"Pretty well. But I woke too early."

"What a horrid shame!" The ardour of Carl was salted with humour. "Five minutes, was it — or ten? Never do to get saucers under your eyes!"

Edyth frowned. She was not very good at seeing jokes — especially against herself.

"All serene, my dear. I was only ragging. A shame to ruffle her dignity, when she looks as fresh as the day . . ."

"Oh, don't start making a fool of me — that's worse," Edyth protested mildly. "If you *will* come in too early, you may as well pour out my tea, or it'll have to be made fresh. *I've* some respect for my complexion — and my nerves."

The older woman needed no second bidding. Edyth always preferred pouring it out herself; and Carl recognised the request as a form of atonement for the implicit rebuff. While filling the cup, she noticed the Indian stamp, and the strong, contained handwriting of the husband she had never seen.

"Mail letter again," she remarked. "Not bothering you any more, is he, about going out?"

"Of course not. That's all settled." Her tone implied: "That's all you need to know." If Carl had her privileges, Edyth had her reserves. She seldom discussed Ian with her friend.

But Carl had barely got over her recent fright.

"Good thing, too. You're *not* going out to that misbegotten country. It would drive me crazy . . ."

"Well, it's not happening — yet. So please keep sane for my sake!"

Decidedly she was bored with Carl this morning. It was a relief to hear Tony's clear voice from the adjoining room: "Mummy, you truly *are* awake. Can't I come now?"

He promptly appeared in the doorway, a slim pyjama'd figure, rather overgrown, hugging a battered cardboard box. Without one resembling feature, except the colour of his eyes, there was a distinct look of Ian in the eager little face.

"Come along, my lamb," she welcomed him, with a light in her eyes that only her sons had power to kindle.

He came with a rush and a leap that shook the whole bed — an assault she would not have tolerated from any other soul alive — and snuggled into the hollow of her arm, one eye on his banana between the kisses.

While she peeled and scraped it, a bright idea occurred to him.

"*Why* do only bananas have the woolly? And why can't I *eat* the woolly?"

"Because Mummy says you can't, darling," she told him serenely. It was typical of the way she answered her children's questions as a whole.

And Tony left it at that. Even if he couldn't eat 'the woolly,' his banana was 'the big kind.' With careful nibbles it would last a long time.

Carl, feeling out of it, picked up her sponge-bag and towel. "I'm off," she jerked out. "You've no use for me now?"

Edyth glanced at the boy. "Well, I can't attend to you both — and my letters."

"And you don't want to read *that* one with me looking on?" Carl jabbed a vicious forefinger at Ian's envelope.

"I don't want to read any of them with anyone looking on," Edyth almost snapped; and Carl, perceiving she had blundered, walked off without answering, her tassels trailing and skipping behind.

Edyth, frankly relieved, stroked Tony's cheek with two fingers and kissed the top of his tousled head. Then she poured out a second cup of tea and opened Ian's letter . . .

Before she had skimmed the first page, her heart seemed to turn over slowly. Her eyes devoured the rest almost at a glance.

And this was what Ian Challoner had written, after several false starts and much searching of heart:

DEAREST EDYTH,

We have just reached Gangabal, the place I wrote about. It was a stiffish march, but Mrs. Vane and Miss Chamier came through with credit. We are camping twelve thousand feet up. The place is indescribably beautiful, but the conditions wouldn't suit your taste! We don't move on till to-morrow, so to-day I can get through a few letters.

I was glad to receive yours before we started on our trip. You evidently take it for granted that I shall acquiesce in your virtual decision not to join me next cold weather. Though I did not say much, I think I made it clear that I was disappointed — since you know I *can't afford* furlough at present, and six years apart is too long. It's a strain, every way.

You must admit, my dear, I've never quarrelled with the children's claim on you. I have tried to make every allowance for the hardships of Indian conditions; and not to worry you by pressing my own claim, or dwelling on my loneliness. But the fact is, Edyth, I have had enough of it. I *want* you out here — unless it's actually distasteful to you — for two or three years, anyway. You will be very welcome, and I shall do my utmost to make you happy, in spite of the wrench and changed conditions.

Just ask yourself — *Is* it fair play giving them all and me nothing?

Later on.

I was interrupted here by the arrival of my mail-bag. It contained a bit of good news that I hope will please you, too. I am to be offered the

Kashmir Residency which falls vacant in the spring; and I have decided to accept.

In many ways, of course, I shall much regret leaving the Border. But every year the work of an Indian Civilian becomes a more thankless, heart-breaking business. Every year we are forced to spend more time in office over forms and files, and less time in the district getting at the people. Good honest work hasn't a chance in an atmosphere of hostility and persistent vilification.

Besides, Kashmir will be far pleasanter for you; the best climate and the finest scenery in India; and I think you might safely bring Tony and Eve out, with a governess to keep their education up to the mark! Two years of Kashmir couldn't hurt either of them. I am longing for Eve; and it would give me a chance of getting to know my youngest son. So I hope, dear, you won't set your face against it out of hand. And don't — if you can help it — disappoint me altogether. Try for a passage the third week of October; then the Red Sea won't be so bad, and you'll find the cold weather here fully established.

If I have expressed myself inadequately, and my letter sounds cool, I assure you my heart is not. But I never could put it on paper. It will really be a great happiness to have you and two of the children with me again. My love to all of you.

Yours

IAN KAYE CHALLONER

By the time she reached the last words, she felt shaken all through. While her surface self clamoured, 'I can't — I *can't!*' she knew, with deadly certainty, that, in the face of that letter, and that appointment, she could not say 'No' again. He seemed almost to imply that she did not care, which was unkind and untrue.

How could she guess he felt lonely or worried, when he had never made her realise his need of her, as the children did every hour of every day? She had instinctively reared them to that end. How far she had tried not to read between the lines of his letters was one of the many side avenues that she found it inconvenient to explore.

It was true the children had been given a long innings; but her seeming desertion had not been deliberate. Carl — and the good things she gave, in generous measure — had been more or less responsible for her original failure to join him after the War.

The obsession was a novelty then; and next autumn had always seemed more possible than this one: so it had somehow slipped on, from year to year. She had instinctively taken every inch of rope he was willing to give her.

Now, it seemed, he would give her no more. His clear request amounted to a demand; and her instant, if reluctant, recognition that, in the face of it, she could not decently refuse again, would have surprised him not a little. Perhaps his personal pride, his deep conviction that force is fatal to love, had made him too chary of self-assertion, with the common result that he had been more or less misunderstood.

Now she saw two things clearly. First, she would have to go out . . . sometime in the autumn. Second, nothing would induce her to take any of her children back to that deadly country — even if it *was* Kashmir.

Tony! That Ian could calmly suggest it, almost angered her. Wasn't it enough that India had robbed her of one son — her lovely little Eldred, not three years old? Perhaps fathers could forget such things. She herself had never forgiven India, or that horrible ayah, who had taken the child too near the bazaar — for her own purposes, of course — though she had strict orders not to go that way, because the place was full of smallpox.

The remembrance of those hideous days was stamped indelibly on her heart. Beryl had caught it, too; and it had spoilt her complexion. But, of course, it was the boy who died. And how wonderful Ian had been; how endlessly good to her, thinking of every little thing. In times like that he came out of his shell, and you saw what stuff he was made of underneath. Eve, who arrived some months after, had been defrauded of her welcome, because she was not a boy; and that bitter disappointment had, in a measure, coloured her attitude to the child ever since.

Then, late in time, the second year of war had given her Tony . . . Tony, who was free from the taint of India, and always should be. Instinctively her arm tightened round him, and he gave a wriggle of response. He was still prolonging his enjoyment with careful nibbles. When it was done, he would want her to play 'Funny Monkeys,' and this morning it was beyond her.

Watching him happily absorbed — his thick tousled hair, his thin little sunburnt hands — Ian's to the life; the pink cheek nearest her with its down of delicate hairs, like the bloom on a peach — realisation overwhelmed her . . .

Silently she caught and crushed him to her with a passionate vehemence, so unlike her normal caresses that Tony concluded a game of some sort had been sprung upon him; and this time his wriggles were not responsive.

“Oh, Mummy, *don't* be lion *yet!*” he commanded, pressing her back with small clenched fists. “Look — you've kwashed my last tip of beenana!”

That steadied her.

“Run away to Nanny with your banana,” she said, bundling him unceremoniously out of bed, which astonished him worse than ever.

“Mummy, why *do* you?” His lip quivered. “We haven't played ‘Funny Monkeys.’”

“We'll play to-morrow, darling.” (It wasn't his fault, poor lamb!) “Run along now, and see how quick you can get dressed.”

Puzzled and reluctant, he obeyed. He was a privileged being, but not a spoilt one. An innate respect for her own comfort saved her from that failing.

Alone again, she turned the key in both her doors. She had need to fortify herself against the arguments of her outraged household. They would all be up in arms. And till she felt more collected she could not face discussions and protests, which her conscience — if not her heart — told her would have to be swept aside.

Carl would have a fit. Beryl would see no rights but her own. Then there would be John and Hensley Harrison.

She felt bitterly sorry for herself in prospect . . .

But, when the breakfast gong sounded, she went downstairs in her green linen gown looking as cool and serene as if there were no such country as India on the map. She had decided to say nothing at all till after lunch. She would have her bath in peace — such comparative peace as was attainable with the dead weight of her secret decision, lying heavy on her heart.

II

Le nombre des êtres qui veulent voir vrai est extraordinairement petit.

AMIEL

By noon she was in the sea, striking out vigorously, numbing thought and feeling with the joy of bodily action — for a time.

On and on she pressed, right away from the others, heedless of a call from Carl about the drag of the undercurrent. Carl herself had been requisitioned as umpire by Beryl and Eve, keen rivals in the water.

And Edyth was glad of it, glad of her passing escape from them all.

On and on . . . cleaving the quiet sea with leisured, graceful strokes . . .

How long could one keep it up? How long beat off the hovering dread that waited to pounce afresh upon her heart? The warmth of sunlight, the living blue above and around her, the buoyant, sparkling sea, that should be filling her with simple joy of life, seemed suddenly more than she could bear . . .

To leave all this — to leave all of them — after six years of Home . . . for *India!* Not the safe, slow-moving, easy-going India of her girlhood and early married life; but an India grown frankly hostile; an India that harassed men like Ian with persistent vilification; servants who went on strike — even *bhis-tis*¹ and sweepers, half-naked creatures, who seemed scarcely human. She had never liked or trusted native servants, for all their salaaming and show of devotion. Now she would be afraid of them.

She had heard tales at first hand — from friends out there — of a lonely civilian in camp, whose bearer attacked him with a bread knife, on the flimsiest provocation; of a *khitmutgar*, who crept into the bedroom one night when the Sahib was away, and tried to assault his mistress. And there was that subaltern's wife kidnapped by tribesmen from Peshawur . . .

¹ Water-carriers.

Isolated cases, of course; but they showed the way things were going. At this rate, India would soon be impossible for English-women.

Things had been bad enough in 1914. She had left the country with a secret hope in her heart that she might not have to return; that she might eventually induce Ian to give up his thankless job, and try for something at Home. He was clever enough, but not pushing enough; eternally stuck in his old Frontier groove. But Sir Eldred Lenox — a former Foreign Secretary at Simla — had plenty of interest in those mysterious regions where strings are pulled for the favoured few. The difficulty had been — knowing Ian and his oddities — to broach the subject.

Before leaving Home, he had tried for special War employment; but they would not spare him. He had very nearly enlisted; but for once she had vehemently stood up to him — and prevailed. During the War, with his exaggerated patriotic notions, he was safer tucked away in India. And afterwards . . . somehow the years had slipped by. The dominion of Carl had complicated things; and now, on this radiant morning — just when she felt secure for another nine months or so — the 'job' had turned up in India, riveting him out there more firmly than ever.

The actual thought of being with him again stirred in her sensations that had lain quiescent a long time. Even if he wasn't demonstrative, he was so thoughtful and considerate in little ways. And how strange it would feel being really a married woman again, after all these years of virtual freedom: not to have complete command of one's everyday life; not to have even one's room to oneself . . .

She had grown faddy about things; less adaptable. Decidedly, six years was too long. They would be positively shy of one another . . .

More shouts from Carl. The regatta was over. She and Beryl were swimming out in pursuit.

Why were human beings all so demanding? Why couldn't they sometimes leave you to yourself? On the whole, that was one of Ian's good points. He was about the least demanding person she had ever known. But now, even *he* . . .

She had turned back to meet the pursuing pair. After lunch she would tell the three of them, when Tony went off for his rest. She knew very well that it was mean, springing it on her friend in front of the girls; but positively she funked telling her alone. It would be bad enough later on.

After lunch, when coffee appeared, she told them.

Carl was already smoking. Eve and Beryl were demolishing a dish of greengages. And Edyth thought suddenly: "If Eve *knew* —!"

There she sat, eager and upright, a plait of dark damp hair between her shoulder blades, intent on outdoing Beryl, who was grabbing the lion's share. She was not a pretty child, but she had more vitality, more brains and character than the other three put together; though nothing would have induced Edyth to admit it. She had Ian's satirical mouth and deep-set eyes, and a brief edition of his decided nose. She was the only one Edyth had not succeeded in keeping younger than her years.

Instinctively she held all of them back, that they might longer have need of her; tirelessly she had given them everything except the power of doing without her. And she was to reap the fruits of it now.

Addressing herself to Beryl, not looking towards Carl, she told her of the Kashmir appointment and of Ian's request.

"But you're not *going*, Mumsie," Beryl broke in upon her carefully prepared statement; not a doubt of the answer in her clear gaze.

"Yes, darling — I *am* going. Of course it will be very upsetting for us all. But Father has waited a long time —"

"Good *God*, Edyth!" Carl exploded, dropping her cigarette. "And you never said a word. And I *told* you . . . Good God!"

"*Really*, Carl!" (Edyth's rebuke was sharpened by the spice of justice in her reproach.) "Your language! Before the girls . . ."

"Don't get rushed, Mumsie. I've said it often." Beryl patted the hand that lay nearest her. "Lots of us do, on the quiet, at school. What harm?"

"Well, dear, I don't like it. Not Eve, I hope?"

"Oh, no, *we* don't," said Eve with a virtuous air, securing the largest remaining greengage. "In our form we only say 'damn!' It's as good as anything when you feel you want to burst."

With her teeth firmly planted in the greengage, she considered her mother's face, thoughts of her father welling up in her heart.

"Won't Daddy be awfully pleased, Mummy? He's been out there such ages. I spec' he's horribly lonely."

"Yes, Eve. He is very lonely." She felt almost grateful to the child for making things easier. And again the thought intruded, "If she knew . . . !"

Carl pushed back her chair, rose and walked to the door.

"Don't go worrying to death over it, dear," Edyth said gently.

But Carl neither answered nor looked round. She was bitterly hurt.

As she turned the handle, Beryl broke out again. "Mumsie, it's too utterly beastly. How *can* you sit there and say it so calmly! I suppose, if you're taking *Tony*, you don't so dreadfully mind."

"I'm not taking *Tony*. Don't say a word in front of him," Carl heard, with amazement, as she closed the door.

The same thought had occurred to her.

"Gracious goodness! He'll howl himself into a fit. And who'll look after him?"

"Carl, I hope. And you, too, Beryl, when you're at home."

Beryl shrugged; her mind was running on her own grievance.

"Not before Christmas, Mumsie. Have you thought of Christmas?"

Edyth had not thought of Christmas. Beryl saw a flicker of indecision in her eyes and ruthlessly pressed her point.

"Promise you won't — or we'll all rise up in rebellion."

"But Father wants me now, darling. It would hardly be fair on him."

"What price unfair on us — Christmas without you! It would be utterly, totally rotten. You wait till *Johnamaroo* comes home . . ."

At the name, Edyth winced internally. John stood only second to Tony — if that.

“John’s old enough to have a little consideration for his father.”

“If you ask me, John’s consideration is strictly reserved for Number One!”

Crudely put — but it was true. Edyth emptied her coffee-cup and rose to go; she could stand no more.

Beryl returned for consolation to her greengages, and found the dish was empty. Eve, furious with her sister, had eaten up the last ones, simply to prevent Beryl from having any more.

Edyth heard them quarrelling over it as she went upstairs to take her usual rest. She needed it, after swimming so far.

Upon the narrow landing, before she reached her room, a door opened, and Carl emerged; eyes red-rimmed, lips shaking.

“Edyth! What the devil have I *done*, that you should treat me so? Settling everything without me, jumping it on me before the children . . .”

“My dear, *do* speak quietly,” Edyth entreated, contrite and dismayed, also troubled (in parenthesis) lest the maids overhear. “I *had* to feel settled in my own mind before I could speak, or I should have been done for.”

“And it’s no matter that *I’m* done for?”

Her voice broke; and Edyth, slipping an arm round her shoulders, kissed her forehead.

“Dear Carl, *don’t!*” she murmured soothingly. “It’ll be horrid for all of us. But we shall survive. One does.”

Her single cruel experience had taught her that much. For answer, the older woman clung to her in mute misery. And Edyth, having no more to say, could only propel her gently towards the open door and escape into her own room.

Mercifully, from force of habit, she slept. She had done enough thinking for one day — for a whole week of days.

She woke with a start, to the sound of voices in the garden. Beryl and Eve quarrelling again. The fundamental clash of their natures reminded her ruefully of herself and Ian.

At the moment Eve's voice was dominant.

"I don't care a bean if you *are* the eldest. You're a nasty selfish pig. I don't believe you care about Daddy one little bit."

"What do you know about my carings, you cheeky pig?" Beryl demanded from the lofty pedestal of sixteen.

"Well, I can *see*. There's poor Daddy in India, wanting Mummy because he's lonely. She *said* so. And here's you being grabby and selfish like you always are."

"You shut up, or I'll make you!" Beryl was off her pedestal in a flash. "*You* don't mind if Mumsie goes . . ."

"I do. But I mind more about Daddy being lonely. We all ought to go, if he wants us."

"Well, he doesn't want us all, Stupid! Sell for *you*! Anyhow, I shall go on beseeching Mum not to go before Christmas. I don't believe she wants to. I'll put Jacko onto her. She can't stand up against him."

By that time Edyth was out of bed, her cheeks tingling. She pulled back the little curtain with a rattle of rings, and leaned out into the blinding sunlight of early afternoon.

"Children, be *quiet*," she commanded, in low, penetrating tones. "Shouting about my private affairs, for the neighbours and servants to hear. Go and find something better to do."

They obeyed; Eve with an inner triumph at having spoken her mind: Beryl faintly aggrieved, because she had got no credit for taking her mother's part.

And Edyth at her looking-glass, tidying her hair, was haunted by their clear voices, their young, pitiless plain-speaking.

Eve's words struck at her heart. How that child adored Ian, whom she really hardly knew! And again came the nagging thought — if she guessed that Ian wanted her, too; wanted her most, perhaps. A small stab of jealousy, here.

And Beryl's last words had hit the mark. She did not want to go before Christmas. Christmas in India was a deadly pretence; big dinner-parties, balls and races and church parades. And it never meant much to Ian. He was neither a sentimental nor a religious man. But she knew she ought to go; and Beryl was a villain to say that about John . . .

She was barely dressed when she heard sounds of arrival. The boy must have caught an earlier train. Her fingers shook a little, as she fastened a clasp at the back of her neck.

Another few moments, and he was outside her door; thrumming on it with his fingers, by way of announcement.

Another moment, and he was beside her, fair and good-looking, as tall as herself. He had her in his arms, he was holding her tighter than usual — as if he knew . . .

His first words told her he did know.

“A nice sort of bomb, this, to drop on a fellow the minute he arrives!”

“John, dear old boy —” her fingers closed on his upper arm. “Beryl had no business to —”

“No — she hadn’t. But she’s frightfully upset. And what price Carl?”

“Naturally, dear, we all are.” Edyth tacitly shelved Carl. Jealousy smouldered between them. “That’s the misery of India. Always these partings and separations. But Father’s been very patient for a long time.”

“Yes — he jolly well has. Bet *I* wouldn’t — in his shoes. It’s rough luck on the Pater. But it’s rough on us, too. He’s used to doing without you. We’re not. Beryl swears you won’t go till after Christmas — not if I ask you prettily.”

“Then don’t ask me prettily,” she pleaded.

“Because you’re so blooming keen — eh?” His wide-set eyes smiled upon her with frank affection, frank scepticism. “Mum — you sinner! You’ll hang on right enough — if it’s only because of the kid. I jolly well know you will.”

And at heart she knew it, too. The mere mention of Tony sufficed.

“How long?” he asked, while she dabbed her nose with a powder puff.

She sighed. “I hope not more than two or three years.”

“All my ’Varsity time! Damn! And where do I blow in for my vacs? And what sort of figurehead’s going to run ‘Beechwoods?’”

“Darling, I’ve had no time to think or plan. We ought to let ‘Beechwoods’ furnished.”

"Oh, Lord! . . . my books and cabinets . . ."

"John, do be reasonable! We must talk it over. But I hope Carl —"

"Thought so. You know I can't stick your Carl. And no you for Commems: Oh, *curse* India! I wish the blasted country had never been invented."

"You can't wish it more than I do," she said, in a shaken voice.

He flung an arm round her shoulder and kissed her.

"Poor, persecuted little Mum! I won't badger you. We'll make the most of what's left. Is your Highbrow adorer coming as per usual?"

"Impertinent boy! He's very clever and very nice."

"Oh, rather — a paragon and all that!" He nipped the top of her arm. "But his brow's too high for my taste, and his nose is too long. And your news will add several inches to his whole intellectual phiz! If you've put on enough powder for his benefit, come and help haul out my things. I've two new ties and a new waistcoat — rippers!"

Hensley Harrison arrived by the tea-train, spruce and alert, with a votive offering of hothouse grapes, an evening paper, a 'Saturday,' and a general air of London. If his brow was a shade too high, he was a young man of lively intelligence, always in the van of new movements and ideas, with all the latest catchwords on his tongue. His frank admiration and friendship flattered Edyth; and, if neither his knowledge nor his ideas went very deep, her own mind was not qualified to discover the fact.

When the moment came to announce her news, she dared not look in John's direction.

"*That's* a nasty one!" Harrison eyed her dismally through divided glasses. "And I'd brought my lecture programme down to discuss with you. We must fix up all the plums before Christmas, for your benefit."

And Edyth said that was charming of him; and felt more flattered than ever when he told her how completely she would be wasted in some God-forsaken 'station' among a lot of benighted Anglo-Indians; and vaguely cheered when he assured her

that within a few years England would practically be quit of India. Self-determination was in the air.

Edyth wondered, uneasily, what about Ian's pension. But her sole desire was to be rid of the subject.

In that respect they were all of one mind. They shelved it instinctively; and in an hour's time they were talking and laughing in their usual vein, as if India and demanding husbands were not.

After dinner, they strolled on the sands till the sea lay smooth as silk under a toneless sky. And when John carried Beryl off to his room, there began between Carl and Harrison one of their silent duels as to who should out-sit the other, and gain a coveted ten minutes tête-à-tête.

To-night Carl won, to Edyth's regret. Harrison, being sleepy, succumbed at last, cursing all plain, elderly 'limpets' (poor Carl was but forty-five); resolved to stick it out till midnight tomorrow. Charming woman, Mrs. Challoner. Obviously rather a jar for her, though she was putting a good face on it.

He might more readily have forgiven the 'limpet,' could he have witnessed her barren victory. Not another word would Edyth speak or hear on the subject of India. It was settled and done with. Details could wait. More than that, no amount of skilled persuasion could draw from her. Under her surface tenderness ran a disconcerting layer of hardness, of quiet obstinacy that simplified life for her in many ways. In her immobile moods, she presented an impervious, lacquered surface to argument, persuasion, or coercion.

Carl persisted — and was lost.

Edyth yawned copiously; declared she was dead tired, and escaped to the sanctuary of her room. Poor old Carl, she reflected philosophically, would cry her heart out in any case; and for herself — a torrent of protest and pleading would have been the last straw. Though she frankly shirked going out to Ian, she had been properly brought up, and he was her husband, after all . . .

Sounds of Tony turning in his camp-bed drew her into the tiny dressing-room.

On the washhand-stand a night-light was burning. He had tossed off his sheet, and lay sprawling in lovely disarray; his head thrown back, one half-bare arm flung across the pillow. On a chair beside him, 'Funny Monkeys' and draughts lay ready for the morning.

Bending over, she gently rearranged him, and pulled up the sheet, stroking his head when he muttered and twitched in his sleep, her still face transfigured as if a lamp had been turned up within.

For a long moment she stood watching him, strangely divided between joy and pain. Then Beryl's remark crept like a snake into her mind, "Tony will howl himself into a fit" — and joy was extinguished in a flood of bitterness.

In that shaken moment the temptation to take him with her was overwhelming. Her refusal, even to consider it, was the one voluntary sacrifice she had ever made of her own comfort and desire. It was the measure of her devotion to the child. Yet, for very love of him, she had selfishly delayed her going till an age when he would feel it keenly. Three years ago, the pang, for him, would have been little more than a pin-prick. And by now, she might have been returning, instead of leaving him . . .

At that thought, the tears she had been holding back all day rained down her cheeks.

Hurrying away, lest she disturb him, she flung herself on her bed, face downward, her whole body shaken with soundless sobs . . .

PHASE THREE
TOGETHER

PHASE THREE

TOGETHER

CHAPTER ONE

*To go on forever, and fail, and go on again . . .
With the half of a broken hope, for a pillow at night,
That somehow the right is the right . . .*

R. L. S.

CHALLONER'S big car drew up, with a snort, under the entrance porch of his Peshawur bungalow. It was an imposing bungalow as to mere size, with pots of bronze chrysanthemums and begonias flanking the verandah steps.

"This time to-morrow . . .!" he thought, as he mounted them; a queer blend of anticipation and nervous dread knocking at his heart. To-morrow, the Bombay mail, that thundered into Peshawur every morning, would bring Edyth — and Eve — back into his life, into the home he had done his masculine best to prepare for their coming.

Against his wife's refusal to bring Eve, he had flatly rebelled. There had been a stiff tussle on paper; and she had only given in on condition that he should hold himself responsible for the consequences. As regards Tony, she had been adamant. She gave no explanation. She refused point-blank. In Challoner's view she was making a needless martyr of herself and being unfair to him. But he knew from experience when to desist: and it was much to have secured Eve.

These preliminary skirmishes, together with her delay in starting — because he wasn't a religious man (wasn't he?) and Christmas didn't mean much to him (didn't it?) — had taken the gilt off things, a trifle. But by now vexation had subsided. To-morrow they were coming . . .

It was near sunset. In the dusk of the hall he saw two women coming out of the drawing-room; and it positively startled him. Then he remembered — Chris and Mrs. Sham, of course. They

had promised to come and put the feminine touches that baffled him and Faizullah and the new plump ayah, who talked mangled English and had twice crossed the black water.

Mrs. Chamier had plagued him with offers of service. She was monumentally good-hearted, in her own way. Yet he had always disliked her, in spite of her 'good heart'—or because of it; he was never quite sure which. But refusal would have seemed ungracious; and there was Chris sincerely anxious to help; and he himself desperately anxious that the place should look friendly and welcoming.

Mrs. Chamier came at him with her forward-thrusting chin; her 'nippers' gleaming benignly in the dusk.

"Dear Colonel Challoner, I *think* we've done everything. Will you look at the drawing-room? If there's anything else . . . we were just going . . ."

"Thanks very much; most kind of you," Challoner said, really meaning it, but hardly sounding as if he did. "Won't you just stay and share my tea?"

She accepted with alacrity. Challoner shouted for lamps and held aside the heavy embroidered curtains that hung over the drawing-room door.

Chris, following her, looked up at him; and behind Mrs. Chamier's navy-coated back they exchanged a smile of understanding that at once put him at his ease.

He patted her shoulder.

"First-rate," he said, with a quick glance of approval.

Mrs. Chamier had already reached the hearth-rug, and was talking again—she usually was, whether anyone listened or not.

Challoner, gravely attentive, scarcely caught a dozen words. He was considering the mysterious change wrought in his familiar room by those pots of golden chrysanthemums near the piano; roses on the broad mantelshelf, bowls of pansies and violets on the Jodhpur brass table; a litter of Home papers; cushions carelessly awry; little things like that. He had left the room a lifeless shell, for all its well-chosen pictures, its priceless Persian carpet, its treasures of Burmese silver and carving. He returned to find it a home. Patently Chris had done most of it; but he felt gen-

uinely grateful to both. When tea arrived, he asked Mrs. Chamier to preside; and her convex lenses beamed more benignly than ever.

Chris, sipping her tea and saying little (neither of them had much chance), listened, with secret qualms, to the persistent refrain of 'Mrs. Challoner this' and 'Mrs. Challoner that.' She knew by now that her Aunt's most formidable virtue was a craze for 'running' people and things, whereby she acquired merit and also made lifelong enemies. According to Chris, if you let her run you — well and good; if you kicked over the traces, you 'got it in the neck.' And if she was going to try and run Colonel Challoner's wife . . . !

"I mean it, Colonel Challoner — I always mean what I say —" the untiring voice ran on. "*Anything* that I can do to help Mrs. Challoner, in any way, will be a pleasure. Rather a pity she's bringing out the little girl. Eleven's far too old."

Chris was pining to stamp on her toes when a sound of wheels outside and a masculine shout set her unmanageable heart aflutter. Quite useless, telling herself not to be a fool. She went on being a fool all the same.

"Hullo, there's Kaye." Colonel Challoner rose rather abruptly, evidently hoping Aunt Amabel would take the hint. But she only helped herself to another sugared cake.

There he was, in the room now, tall and smiling — just as poor Colonel Challoner really seemed in danger of suffocation or explosion. But Aunt Amabel noticed nothing. She was too busy with her cake.

Challoner was more than relieved. He was keenly pleased. Kaye had taken to dropping in lately; and several of his particular friends had done the same. It was as if they sought him out while they were still sure of the old welcome from the identical Challoner they had played and worked with all these years — a wordless tribute he valued to the full.

With Kaye's diplomatic assistance the women were tactfully shepherded off the scene; and he stayed on for more than half an hour, smoking and talking; making the most of his last chance. The house wouldn't be the same after to-morrow.

Looking round the room, appraising the handiwork of Chris,

remembrance of Vanessa crept in, as often happened when he delighted in beautiful things. And impulsively he spoke his thought.

"They've made it look ripping," he said. "Those violets and pansies on the brass. If only she — Mrs. Vane — were here, wouldn't she love it?"

For half a second the Colonel looked as if he had a bad twinge of toothache. He kicked a log viciously and muttered, "Yes — of course she would," in a rather bored voice, which made Kaye feel almost angry. Did nothing on earth matter to him because Eve and his wife were coming to-morrow?

And Challoner, under his bored exterior, was damning Kaye for dragging in by the heels the one person he had been trying all day to shut out of his thoughts. Turning abruptly from the mantelpiece, he sat down and began talking about a case in the district which was very much on his mind.

"It began over landmarks and boundaries," he said. "Now it's run to murder — a feud between the families. And the man who gets at the rights of it will be a clever fellow. The old *zemin-dar's* a particular friend of mine; one of the straightest Pathans I know. The boundary squabble was in my hands, of course; but while I was on it, the parties met by chance, started with abuse, and finished up with *lathis*. Rustum Khan and his sons had the best of it. And what's the sequel? He's accused of murdering his enemy's father, a blind, harmless old beggar of ninety. His body was found on the scene of the quarrel — the head battered in. Rustum Khan swears he never set eyes on the old man; and I believe him. But the Police report goes against him; and the other fellow has the dibs. It'll be faked evidence and false witnesses all the way . . .!"

"Harland Sahib," Faizullah announced.

"*Salaam dō*," said Challoner; adding mentally, "Let 'em all come!" as he rose to greet the Divisional Judge — a large, slow, kindly man, whose conscience was a burden to him and whose work was always in arrears.

Kaye did not sit down again. "I'll be getting on to the Club now, Colonel," he said, remembering Chris, and Challoner moved with him to the door.

“Come in on Sunday — and pay your respects. See you to-night.”

He was Honorary Member of the Gunners' Mess; and, except for guest-nights, this would be the last of it.

Harland stayed nearly an hour. When he left, it was too late to be worth going to the Club. An armchair and a pipe by the fire might induce forty winks before it was time to dress.

All day an uneasy restlessness had preyed upon him; a blend of suppressed excitement and nervous dread. Edyth's recent letters had given him little clue as to the spirit in which she was coming; and he was almost pathetically anxious to see her in the best light; to make their fresh start a success, as far as in him lay.

He hoped she would accept in the right spirit his inability to meet them at Bombay. Owing to pressure of work, he had been granted a special assistant, and leave was out of the question. He had sent them, for escort, the most devoted and reliable of his *peons*, Shere Ali Khan, with a word of welcome, the warmest he could achieve . . .

And while his surface mind reached forward, his subconscious thoughts were hovering about a letter from Srinagar in his breast-pocket; not a long one, but a real one. Vanessa had Quita's gift that way. She seemed very happy and busy up there, skating and dancing, giving violin lessons and knocking her diary into shape. And of course there were men around. Thorne seemed a good deal in evidence. Well — why not? What did it matter to him?

It mattered excruciatingly to him. No use blinking the fact. That other men were free to win her, while his own hands were tied, filled him with such a fury of stifled jealousy as he had not known himself capable of till now. He might trample on the thought; thrust it from him; kill it he could not. An overlong space between her letters woke it hideously to life.

Also he very much wanted to know if she really had enough to live on; and he had no right to ask, even in the way of friendship. She did not write often; and he tried to be grateful for that. He never wrote himself, except in reply to hers; and he did his best to put right out of his mind that exquisite, amazing moment of

revelation at Gangabal, that unforgettable vision of her in her tent at Sonamarg. But there were times when his schooled inner self rebelled; times when these months alone, waiting for Edyth, had been a horrid strain. One way and another Edyth had a good deal to answer for. And now that she was coming, she had spoilt things in a measure — for herself and him — by her refusal to bring Tony. He had counted on it with Kashmir in view. It had been a bitter disappointment, and he felt sore about it still.

She didn't seem keen about Kashmir. Was she ever, about anything — beyond the children? But surely she would manage to be happy in the Srinagar Residency with its beautiful garden and every luxury at command. If only she'd had the sense to bring Tony, the four of them together might have achieved a measure of content. There is a second blooming in marriage, as in life; but slender hope of it, when one heart has gone astray and the other has been left behind . . .

He consulted his watch. Time to be moving, thank goodness.

But, even in his dressing-room, thoughts swarmed and buzzed in his brain like bees. His solitary bed in the corner set him wondering, with a twisted smile, if he had done right in that initial respect. After all these years, she might prefer her room to herself. That was his practical view of it. And it had simply not occurred to him to ask her in advance: so fatally are the complexities of marriage aggravated by the false modesty of an earlier day that could not, or would not, deal naturally with things natural.

If his consideration had been superfluous, no doubt she would say so. But he wanted above all things to avoid a false step at the start. Too well he knew that success or failure hung largely on the first few hours the first day — on a look, a touch, a word.

Thank God for Eve, whose young, uncomplicated happiness would ease things for them both.

CHAPTER TWO

You turn your face, but does it bring your heart?

BROWNING

It was bitter cold in the lamplit dusk of Peshawur station. Challoner paced the platform, stamping his feet now and then.

Between splashes of yellow light, scurrying, screaming shades of third-class passengers swayed this way and that. Lordly Sikhs and Afridis jostled Hindu *bunnias*. Women, with naked babies astride on their hips, dragged their *chuddahs* half across their faces and made effective use of one bright dark eye if any handsome fellow came near. At intervals, they ran screaming for no visible reason, except that it adds to the excitement of travel; and the babies, wailing in protest, looked as if their bullet heads would wobble off and be left behind.

High above the din rose strident, long-drawn cries: "Mussulman-pani-pine wallah," "So-oda wahter, nimolade!"¹

It was as if one were paying for one's sins in some chill inferno, full of lost souls doomed to ceaseless lamentation.

Then the bell clanged. Inferno swelled to pandemonium; and above it came the roar of the train, rushing in upon them out of space, like some chimerical monster, grinding and clanking, emitting sparks and steam . . .

Challoner, looking admirably indifferent, made his way through the jostling, yelling crowd.

Ah — there she was — unmistakable, in grey hat and long fur coat — hesitating, palpably, in the open doorway.

He pushed on and waved his stick. She had seen him. She nodded, smiling. And there, close beside her, was Eve — a tall slip of a thing, waving frantically . . .

Before he could reach them, she had sprung onto the platform heedless of a restraining gloved hand — and hurled herself into his arms.

Her he could and did kiss there before them all.

¹ Lemonade.

"Oh, Daddy, *Daddy!*" She slipped a hand through his arm. Tears started

"Hold up, little woman. Not here," he said, pressing the hand under his elbow. She struck him as rather a wisp; too tall for eleven; and a qualm shot through him — ought he not to have insisted — ?

His wife he could only greet with a close handclasp, and a long look into her serenely smiling eyes; more than a little tired behind the smile and the serenity.

Mutely they gauged one another across a barrier of futile first words. One had to say something, however inane, standing there, while porters vociferously bundled out bedding-rolls and bags and all the endless oddments of a long-distance journey.

"You've not had much sleep worth mentioning, I'm afraid?"

"Hardly a wink, for three nights."

"India *does* give one a rough reception! I was sorry I couldn't get down to Bombay. You understood — ?"

"Oh, of course — And Shere Ali was wonderful. Such good English!"

"Have you forgotten all your Hindustani?"

"Not quite! But I was never brilliant, was I?"

Their eyes met in a more intimate smile — and the difficult moment was over, on the surface at least.

Outside, by the motor, he was introduced to Miss Minton — small, neat-featured, and inconspicuous, with rather good eyes — always the first thing he noticed in a face.

He put her in front, with the chauffeur, and they three sat behind; Eve snuggled against him, clutching the arm that encircled her.

Edyth lay back luxuriously against an extra large cushion he had specially put in for her. Surrendering herself to its vast softness, grateful to him for thinking of it, she remembered how that was his way of showing affection. The cushion, in effect, was saying for him those tender welcoming things which she would rather hear spoken, since they might ease a little the ceaseless ache at her heart. She felt unutterably tired. She could not rouse herself to talk; and he would be quite happy with Eve. He was looking very nice, but rather older than she expected . . .

He *was* quite happy with Eve, but he was also very much aware of Edyth's silence. Was she simply hating it all? Was there no ghost of a thrill in returning to the old blood-stained Border, with all its horrors and its strange fascination; its extremes of beauty and squalor, of gaiety and danger, of lifelong friendships and more than lifelong feuds? Was there no pleasant quickening of memory in the sharp bite of its morning air, the bustle of soldierly activity, the whiffs of wood-smoke, the greenery of the Mall, with its bungalows and blossoming gardens, its framework of stark frontier hills? Here and there a snow-peak of the Suleiman range looked over them, catching light from the new-risen sun; and streamers of morning mist still veiled the valley of Peshawur.

Her eyes followed the shifting scene; but they were curiously unrevealing eyes. Once, when they lingered on the dark of the hills, he remarked tentatively, "They're rather beautiful in this light, but I expect they look a bit rugged — after Home?"

She nodded. "I never could see the beauty of them. They're so harsh and forbidding. And the spaces out here are so enormous, so unfriendly . . . like the people are, nowadays."

"You won't be bothered with their unfriendliness. I'll see to that!" He turned it off lightly, glad of Eve's excited exclamation at a string of disjointed-looking camels, that went shuffling past like old gentlemen in down-at-heel slippers, raising a maximum of dust and emitting a maximum of smell.

Edyth put her handkerchief to her nose, but the scent of camels defies eau-de-cologne.

Eve wriggled with delight, and quoted Kipling. She was a voracious reader. "'We haven't a camelty tune of our own, To help us lollop along' — D'you remember, Daddy? I love your Jungle Books. And they *do* lollop, don't they?"

There was pure refreshment in the young voice, the cool, clinging hand, her eager delight in it all. Poor Edyth was tired. Better leave her alone . . .

In the drawing-room, a low table was invitingly set with *chota hazri* and fruit before a log fire that blazed halfway up the chimney. But the morning sun did not penetrate beyond the veran-

dah, where Eve had been held up, making love to Larry. Miss Minton, the pink of consideration, had tactfully remained with the child — ‘giving them a chance,’ as she decorously put it to herself. For she was a creature of romantic susceptibilities under her correct, colourless exterior; and this reunion of a husband and wife, after long absence, had, for her, all the thrill of a novel in real life.

Challoner, finding they were alone, felt strung up almost unbearably. This was the one moment that must *not* go wrong.

Pulling off her gloves, she held out a chilled hand to the fire, and, as he drew off her coat, she shivered. “These Indian houses strike so cold.”

At once he felt checked. Did it occur to her that she struck cold? Would she make no remarks that were not disconcerting?

“Faizullah has done his best,” he replied, laying down the coat and returning to her side. “Built a small bonfire in your honour. You’ll feel warm presently.”

“Yes — of course. It’s a glorious blaze and the flowers are lovely.”

She suddenly perceived she was being ungracious and he was shaming her by his unflinching consideration.

She faced him smiling. She looked tired, but well-cared-for; her skin smooth and clear, her hair, scarcely touched with grey, puffed out becomingly each side under her hat. Her lips moved unsteadily. Their softness stirred him, as always.

“My dear, it feels very strange and very pleasant having you back again,” he said — and took her in his arms.

She returned his kiss with more fervour than he had expected from her manner and remarks; and she clung to him, after his embrace loosened, with something that was not fervour — a sort of mute desperation.

Sounds of Eve and Larry in the hall came as a relief to both. And both were ashamed of the fact. Could either have confessed to it frankly, lightly, the saving grace of humour would have entered in and the ice would have been broken between them.

As it was, they instinctively drew apart. He pulled the big arm-chair nearer the fire, and shifted a carved stool towards it with his foot.

"There — sit and get warm. Will you pour out tea? Or are you tired enough to trust me this morning?"

Her lids had drooped, as warmth pervaded her. She lifted them and smiled — pleased that he remembered.

"I'll trust you this morning," she said.

He made her tea, exactly as she liked it; buttered a slice of fresh toast, and cut it in strips for her.

Tea laid its soothing spell upon her. She sipped and scrunched in a grateful silence; while he attended to Miss Minton, plied Eve with toast and jam and bananas, and fooled with Larry, who had straightway taken the new playmate to his overflowing, uncritical dog's heart . . .

Edyth, warmed through, touched by his kindness, desperately weary, fell into a light doze . . .

Presently, she woke, with an uneasy reluctance, and the very feel of Tony's thin little hands at the back of her neck where he had clasped it in her fleeting dream — where he had clasped it, actually, in that last long hug when Carl had fairly to drag him away . . .

Reluctantly she opened her eyes. Faizullah was creeping out with the tray, anxious not to disturb her. And she only thought — watching him — why was there always something furtive about their movements? Of course, it came partly from being barefooted; but partly it was something in themselves. She had never liked the man; and now his dark bearded face repelled her.

When he had gone, Ian came in just as quietly; but it was not the same thing at all.

"Rested a little?" he asked. (He had her very much on his mind.)

"Yes. It's delicious here. Where's Eve?"

"They're unpacking. Your room's ready — and a steaming hot tub. Will you come — or wait a bit?"

"I'll come."

He gave her a hand out of the chair; and retained hers a moment, smiling at her with his eyes, in the old way. Tony would smile like that, when he was a man.

"You look wonderfully fresh, in spite of your journey, wonder-

fully young," he said — thinking involuntarily of another face, whose freshness and youth were of so different a quality. "Who would believe I'm only three years older? I seem a middle-aged wreck by comparison."

"Nonsense! It's only that you work too hard." She smiled charmingly at him, pleased with his compliment — so rare from Ian; but the clutch of Tony's hands was still on her heart.

He led her through the hall into her bedroom — large and bare and lofty, with window slits fifteen feet up and doors opening on to the verandah. There was fine Chinese matting on the floor, with expensive-looking rugs here and there. The furniture was good, too — she had an eye for value; but mere cupboards, a mere dressing-table and armchair seemed lost against vast expanses of whitewashed wall. And her solitary bed with its beautiful Bokhara coverlet looked too lonely for words.

Away in the comfort and privacy of her many-windowed room at 'Beechwoods,' she had half hoped he might feel as she did about it. Now she had her wish; and she was only aware of a puzzled disappointment. Why did *he* wish it? Why had he not even asked her? Why couldn't they talk of things naturally? It was ludicrous feeling so shy of one another — even if it was six years —

And Challoner, watching her face, wondered ruefully, 'What's wrong now?' He had taken special pains over the room; spent more than he could afford on it.

"Do you like it, dear? Is it all right?" he asked, in a tentative voice. "Being used to it, I thought you might prefer it — this way? Of course — if you don't —?"

"No — I don't," she said, with surprising decision, fingering her long chain — his Christmas present. "I would rather — as it used to be."

"That's all right. — You poor dear ill-used person!" To her surprise, he slipped an arm round her; drew her against him. "I'll tell Faizullah" — an awkward pause — "Well, I'll tell him I forgot to give the order! He's hardened to my vagaries in that line."

She looked round at him, leaning closer; the past stirring in her.

"Are you as bad as ever that way?"

"Rather worse — not having had you to check me!"

He saw her glance wander round the room again with a hint of uneasiness.

"Edyth — you aren't afraid — in my house?" He pressed her.

"Oh, no! Of course I know — there's nothing to be afraid of."

"But you've got the jumps? A bad start!" (He thought: 'That's at the bottom of it.' And his arm dropped away from her.) "The ayah's sitting outside. She knows English. You've only to call."

As he turned to go, his slight change of manner smote her. Her fingers closed on his arm. "Dear Ian — *thank* you!"

"What for?" he asked with his quizzical smile. "For dragging you out here against your will?"

She winced at his directness — and ignored it.

"For thinking of every little thing — and being so kind."

"To my own wife? Did you expect me to beat you?"

Her lifted face — softened and puzzled — tempted him. That serene, surface coolness of hers had power to move him, always. It made him want to rouse her, as, on occasion, she could be roused; and set him heartily wishing that the small change of love came more trippingly to his tongue. Words failing, he kissed her again . . .

When he had gone, she sat limply down on the edge of the bed, feeling as if all power of movement had clean gone from her. Something — some undefined thought or hope, that had kept her going all through that intolerable journey — seemed to snap inside her.

But though her limbs refused their office, her brain moved languidly, wondering — Did he think her wish to have him with her was only funk? It was very thoughtful of him, of course; very like him; but still — if he really cared enough to want her back again . . . would he have been quite so considerate as all that?

She simply did not know. Yet they had been married nearly twenty years.

CHAPTER THREE

*There is much grace
In woman when thus bent on martyrdom.*

GEORGE MEREDITH

IT did not take long for Chris to perceive that her qualms in respect of the Amiable Sham were justified — more or less. And the worst of it was she felt responsible — rather more than less. As usual, she had acted on impulse; without considering that, if she was in it, her unquenchable Aunt would inevitably be 'in it' too.

Of course Aunt Amabel meant well. She always unflinchingly did. That was the awful thing about her. It lurked behind her worst enormities and made you feel a beast for running her down. Deprived of her children, blessed with an easy-going husband, she went to and fro in the earth seeking victims on whom she might lavish her superfluous energies, her fatal passion to help. Chris having proved intractable, her obsession of the moment was 'dear Mrs. Challoner'; and to Edyth, at first, she seemed a Godsend, a friendly pilot in social and domestic ways grown strange to her: the unwritten law, for instance, compelling her to call on every possible or impossible woman in a station the size of Peshawur.

In England, she had become fastidious and socially lazy; revolving in her own select circle of friends. Now, a martyr confessed, she must drive round, 'shooting cards' or invading strangers' bungalows between the unholy hours of twelve and two.

It was Mrs. Chamier who supplied her with a calling list, plus potted family histories. It was Mrs. Chamier who usually accompanied her, since Ian was seldom available, except on Sunday mornings, when she invariably went to church — if he did not. She had no intention — she rubbed it in — of falling back into casual Anglo-Indian habits. And, in some dim way, going to church gave her a comforting sense of keeping in touch with Home, of being on the right path — the way of the majority. In much the same spirit she read her Bible fitfully, with pious in-

attention; nor ever thought of asking herself whether her week-day mind endorsed the tremendous statements, aspirations, and demands that her lips murmured — with correct intonation — very nearly every Sunday in the year. Her private prayers, for the most part, were specified lists of good things desired for herself and the children; lists almost as unvarying as her weekly order for groceries, with familiar phrases from the collects tacked on at the end.

Now and again she prayed for Ian — that he might come to see the error of his ways; never dreaming that he knew the Great Book ten times more intimately than she did; or that his questing spirit, with its occasional flashes of vision, came nearer true faith in the Unseen than her own negative acceptance of a material heaven organised by a God who dealt out blessings on demand.

In some ways it was very nice being back with him again — in spite of India and in spite of Tony. The first awkward shyness had passed off in a day or two; but the years alone seemed to have thrust him farther than ever into his shell. Not for a moment did she feel responsible for those years. Not for a moment did she recognise that, if a husband's ardour cools, a wife may have only herself to blame. She was in no way concerned with that finest of all fine arts — love after marriage. In her eyes the whole affair was simple and obvious to the point of platitude. You fell in love and you married — and there was an end of it. A right-minded man went on loving his wife as naturally and inevitably as the sun rose every morning. After-war divorce cases might have enlightened her; but she turned, with fastidious disgust, from divorce court news and lurid 'love dramas,' as from things altogether outside her own decently ordered world. Yet, in these first days — with England and Tony nagging at her heart — a little more fervour from Ian would not have come amiss. Rarely demonstrative herself, she appreciated a show of feeling from others — when she happened to be in the mood. Had her husband loved her more urgently in the first place, he might have been a happier man and she a less unsatisfactory wife. As things stood, she believed him incapable of caring very strongly about anything outside his work and India — and possibly Eve.

No lack of demonstration there. The child saw to that. Edyth had tried to repress her at first, lest Ian should find her devotion rather overwhelming. Instead, it seemed amazingly to draw him out of his shell; to reveal a side of his nature she had scarcely guessed at, certainly never known. She often saw them in the distance, with Larry, being utterly silly together. But if she joined them, it would somehow fizzle out. Goodness knew *she* had no desire to be 'silly,' but sometimes their way with each other made her feel left out in the cold.

Increasingly she missed the normal outlet for her maternal instincts. She wanted to be doing things for her children; simple, practical things that demanded no undue effort of mind or body. Like many women of her tenacious, unimaginative kind, her motherhood was largely a matter of the maternal impulse tintured, but not imbued, with the deep-rooted, creative mother-love that 'beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things.' She cared most for her children while they were physically dependent on her, before their budding individualities set them over against her, or made demands on her that she was not qualified to meet. Decidedly her love for Tony came nearest to the real thing; and for him she had made the one big sacrifice that left her stranded in India with empty arms and idle hands.

Out here she had only Eve. She was very fond of Eve — within limits. But the initial disappointment, that had coloured her early feeling for this one child, unconsciously coloured it still; so — in a measure — did her husband's peculiar devotion to the daughter who should have been a son. Eve was very lovable in certain moods; but those moods seemed mainly reserved for her father. Possibly the child's inner, critical attitude had much to answer for. Edyth never guessed it. She was too unperceptive. But the child's mentality affected her unawares. It increased the craving for Tony. It waked a dim — very dim — suspicion that, perhaps, after all, she had been a fool for her pains . . .

Her hidden, unreasoning antagonism to India did not pass. Unimaginative though she was, the all-pervading 'feel' of the country affected her like the presence of an aggravating person. That is the paradox of India — the secret of her spell; of the

fatal illusion that she is one and not many. For all her diversity and complexity, from the hills to the sea, her prevailing idiosyncrasies bear the impress of a strongly marked individuality, which has made her, through the ages, an object of curiously personal love or hate. Her glaring surfaces, her mysterious hidden elements, her vast perspectives — material and spiritual — her flies, her dust, her lacquer-coated regions of cruelty and filth and disease — these are India. Travel for a week on end — and they are with you still. You will not escape them altogether even in the uttermost hills. And to escape them altogether was the secret, unswerving wish of Edyth Challoner's heart.

In the daily round of life, her vague general antipathy narrowed down to acute dislike and distrust of her native servants. Her Hindustani had grown rusty and their English was practically nil. Only her plump, over-assiduous ayah was voluble; eager to act as interpreter; but on these occasions she added to her ready tongue such shameless use of her eyes that Edyth felt it was 'improper' and only called her in as a last resort.

They were horrid, incomprehensible creatures, deceitful and indescribably dirty. She hated them all, huddled away in their rabbit warren at the end of the compound, living their strange lives; always surrounding her, yet always apart; covertly disrespectful, secretly hostile to her and her Western craze for cleanliness and sanitation. She saw them as beings utterly alien and unapproachable; only to be distrusted on principle and vaguely feared.

Above all, she feared and distrusted Faizullah, who had completely got the upper hand, even with Ian. It seemed he was sacred; the real ruler of the household. Everything hinged on him and his bosom friend Rahāt Ali, cook and *khansamah*. Between them they had probably been fleecing Ian for years. Not knowing the language, she felt ignominiously at their mercy. And Ian seemed less ready to help her in this all-important respect than in others.

So it was to Mrs. Chamier she turned for domestic counsel and sympathy — though already she began to be rather bored with the woman; and it was to Mrs. Chamier she owed the brilliant

suggestion of replacing Rahāt Ali by an English-speaking Goanese cook. They were becoming quite the fashion; far more satisfactory than Indians, who were getting above themselves these days; and by great good luck she had a 'perfect treasure' up her sleeve. She was the sort of woman whose sleeve chronically bulges with 'perfect treasures.' All her geese were swans, and woe betide the friend who found them otherwise.

Edyth's gratitude had moved her to something like effusion. She could get to grips with a man who spoke English; escape from the dominion of Faizullah. The only lion in the path was Ian; a rather formidable lion. But she meant to have her own way.

She sagely waited till Sunday. He so often seemed tired after dinner. He worked much too hard, which was foolish of him, since it made no difference in his pay. She put off church till the evening, so as to have the morning clear. And of course he seized his chance of taking Eve out in the car. He wanted to show her the city. His suggestion that Edyth should come too was politely declined. She hated the city; and she was annoyed with him for unconsciously spoiling her plans.

Kaye turned up for lunch, and Captain Eden, Ian's special assistant; rather a nice fellow, but to-day she wished them both elsewhere. She was also afraid that, with Ian's assistance, they were spoiling Eve.

They were all in the garden now, giving her a riding lesson. She would go out presently and see if there was any chance of detaching Ian. Meantime she would write up her diary letter to Carl.

CHAPTER FOUR

*The cares that petty shadows cast
By which our lives are chiefly proved.*

TENNYSON

EVE was in the seventh heaven. While her mother unwillingly re-adapted herself to India, the child had plunged head foremost into the exciting novelty of it all. India, where Daddy was, had always been her wonderland, and the reality exceeded her wildest dreams. Heaps of sunshine and heaps of fruit (all you could eat and more than Mummy would allow) and mountains, and Larry and horses to ride; not a doddering old pony on the sands, but Daddy's own Zaidée.

And far above everything, there was Daddy himself. He looked rather old, now; but there was his same twinkle and his same funny smile and the feel of his hand that told how much he loved you inside, even if he didn't fuss about it.

This morning, her drive through the city eclipsed all lesser joys: new sights, new smells, wild-looking people everywhere; open shops full of fruit and sweets and every mortal thing. And they had gone up onto a high tower, where you could see all the Indians living on their roofs, especially the women and their babies. Daddy called them Indians; Mummy said 'natives.' They always seemed to say things different, whatever it was. But of course Daddy's way must be right. He had bought her a real Indian woman's bangle, and a scrumptious little white fur animal for her neck; and she had come back 'quite intosticated' with excitement.

No wonder her well-regulated mother had qualms. No wonder her father felt the years slip away from him, and found it hard to keep her correctly subdued; harder still because of her repressed fervour of feeling that was for him alone. He knew it, and Edyth knew it. And the thought would creep in — Tony should be here to balance things. But he had not broached the subject since her arrival. It was too obviously labelled 'Dangerous.' He still felt sore about it, and he had not the clue to her obstinate refusal.

Already his hopes of success were wilting. It was not that she had changed. It was that she had somehow lost significance. Yet his will was set to do all he could for her, and feel all he could for her, in the difficult circumstances. The very knowledge of his inner defection impelled him to be a little freer than his wont with the small change of affection. Having dragged her from her beloved children, he must not let her doubt his need of her. But she, like himself, was a creature of reserves; and now, more than ever, he was aware of an intangible barrier — not in her only, but in himself; as it were, a screen for that which she must never be allowed to know. Whatever their mutual failings, he had been straight with her always; and the knowledge that he could never be entirely straight with her again was not the least part of his secret dilemma . . .

And invariably his troubled thoughts returned with relief to the same point — thank God for Eve! Her gift for music delighted him. It revealed already an understanding ahead of her years.

To-day, he had shamelessly rejoiced with her over the unexpected reprieve from church. And now — tiffin being over — she had begged for a riding lesson, because the mysteries of trotting baffled her.

“Zaidée’s back always seems to be coming up, just when I’m coming down,” was her lucid description of a mutual misunderstanding that left her sadly bumped and bruised.

It was in progress on the wide sweep of the drive; Jagasar ambling at Zaidée’s head and Eve assiduously coming down all wrong, with peals of laughter at her own expense. Her hat had fallen off. Her dark hair, with big uneven waves in it, blew out like a banner.

The two young men on the lawn shouted instructions and cheered her failures. Challoner called after her, “Hold hard, Eve! You *must* have your hat —”

He was interrupted by a shriek of triumph. “Daddy — I’ve done it — I’ve done it! Look! *Hut-jao!*”¹ The last imperiously to Jagasar, who jumped aside grinning at the prowess of the ‘*Chota-Miss.*’

¹ Get away.

Instinctively she had caught the rhythm of it; and she took the curve of the drive — hatless, elated; her father's eyes following her, with a thrill of pride in the pluck and vitality of her, the immature grace of her slender body enhancing the finished grace of the creature she bestrode.

Striding across the lawn, he caught at Zaidée's rein.

"Well done, little woman," he said — putting up his hands to lift her down.

"But, Daddy — perhaps it won't ever come again." Her lip quivered.

"Oh, it will. But out here, hats is hats — or you get sunstroke. Down you come!"

Down she came; and the hat was restored. Then excitement seized her afresh. "I've done it — all on my own!"

She jiggled up and down, clutching his arm, unaware of her mother's mild disapproval emanating from the drawing-room doorway, while Larry sprawled up, thrusting a black nose between them, pleading not to be left in the cold.

Eve flung an arm round him. "I believe he's jealous. Make him play 'tuck tail' — do!"

Challoner needed no pressing. He enjoyed the foolish game almost as much as the puppy himself. It was a desperate affair, of dramatic feints and threats of pursuit, that spurred Larry to a frantic pitch of excitement; sent him darting here, crouching there, doubling and dodging like a hare, fully alive to the joke; uttering shrill yaps of glee as he dashed, like lightning, under his master's menacing arm; tail tucked firmly all the while between his legs . . .

And the two young men pranced to and fro cheering him on. And Eve, weak with laughter, hung onto Kaye's arm . . .

Edyth could stand no more. The noise they made distracted her attention and quickened her aggrieved sense of being left in the cold. Eve was running wild with those boys. Ian really ought to keep some check on her.

"Ian — *Ian!*" she called out. "Do stop the dog making that noise. I'm trying to write letters. It's impossible!"

Challoner, crouching for a fresh onslaught, straightened himself with a jerk of uncontrollable annoyance.

"Shut up, Larry," he said, without looking round; and the devoted creature bounded towards him, sprawling up and licking his hand.

There was a moment of awkward silence. Kaye and young Eden felt implicitly rebuffed. They had been making far more noise than the dog. And Edyth, having effectually spoilt their game, went back to her letters.

Eve recovered first. She was inured to her mother's ways. "Let's have clock golf. That can't 'sturb Mummy. Come on, Captain Eden. We'll get the things and route out 'Smin-ton" — an irreverent abbreviation which her mother deprecated in vain.

Challoner, left with Kaye, proffered a cigar. Kaye helped himself.

"'Fraid I must be off, Colonel," he said. "I'm riding with Chris."

Challoner eyed him, wondering . . .

He was puzzled about those two and their oddly indeterminate affair. All Peshawur coupled their names together. But the cold weather dwindled — and nothing came of it. He disliked speaking, but he had grown very fond of Chris; and he would be glad of proof direct that Kaye was his own man again. There was something inherently distasteful in the thought that he and the boy . . . His mind refused to complete the sentence.

They had finished lighting up. Challoner flung away his match.

"Kaye," he said abruptly, "forgive a direct question. But I'm bothered a bit. Are you — going to marry Chris?"

Kaye stared; patently taken aback. It was so unlike the Colonel.

"No such luck! I have it on the best authority."

Challoner smiled. "When is an answer not an answer? Does that mean — you've asked her?"

"Not precisely. But we understand each other. She told me — at Gulmarg — I wouldn't have a chance if I did. You see — things were a bit awkward there, for both of us. That was her notion. She's so jolly straight."

"She is. And straight people sometimes need protecting from themselves. They're badly handicapped in a crooked world. Don't trade on her straightness, Kaye."

"Trade on it — ?" Anger smouldered in his tone.

"You wouldn't for the world! But what else are you doing, old boy? Hanging round, keeping other men off. *If* — you are in earnest, well and good. That's my point. Are *you* content to hang on, like this, indefinitely?"

Challoner's eyes asked the real question that he could not bring himself to put in direct form; but that question was the last one Kaye could be induced to answer in any form.

"Oh, well — I haven't thought much about it — knowing it was a wash-out."

Challoner suddenly faced him.

"Look here, Kaye, if you want to do the honest thing, you ought either to make quite sure of that . . . or go more discreetly with Chris."

Kaye, it seemed, hesitated to commit himself — or there was someone else on his mind. "Have you heard lately — from Kashmir?" he asked, staring hard at the tip of his cigar.

Challoner's teeth closed so sharply on his own cigar that he almost bit the end off.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Oh, nothing. Only . . . Chris hasn't. And . . . I was wondering . . ."

"You'd do better to quit wondering in that direction, Kaye."

Something in his godfather's look and tone set Kaye suddenly wondering in quite another direction. The bare possibility staggered him. He wanted, overwhelmingly, to know. But of course he never would.

When the others reappeared, he took his leave; and Challoner felt a passing qualm.

"Don't make too much of my remarks, old boy," he ventured, having sped his arrow. "You know what you're after. Go ahead."

"All right, Colonel. I'm glad you spoke." (What, precisely, did he mean by that?) "We'll look in later. So long!"

Kaye being gone, Challoner was pressed into taking his place — as he could only have been pressed by Eve. They had not long been at it when Edyth reappeared, only to find him still in the toils. Miss Minton seemed to be discreetly flirting with Captain Eden, while Ian and Eve fooled with Larry, who had captured the ball.

Eve, having coaxed it from him, stood up and waved it aloft.

“Hullo, Mumsy!” she cried. “If you’ve finished your old letters, come along and play.”

“No, dear, I can’t. I’ve other things to do.”

But her glance was for Ian, as she went back into the house.

Eve, clutching her father, looked up at him with mischief in her eyes.

“I’m afraid Mummy thinks we aren’t behaving like Sunday. But how *can* you — in this exciting India — ?”

“You can’t,” Captain Eden gravely assured her. He was good-looking, with nice eyes and a friendly smile. “The simplest plan is — not to try!”

“Now, then, Eden!” — Challoner shook his club at the young man. “I won’t have you demoralising my daughter!”

“Daddy, I’m not dimmoralised — I’m only happy.”

He caressed her cheek with the back of his hand. “Some people think it amounts to the same thing.”

“Oh, I hate those sort of people. But ’Smiddy and I are going to go to church this evening. That’ll undimmoralise us!”

Her father tweaked a lock of her hair. ’Smiddy turned a dull pink and bungled her shot. She wished Eve wouldn’t use that undignified nickname in front of Captain Eden. He was such a nice man. He proved it, by saying at once:

“I’ll come and be undemoralised, too. Give you a lift in my trap.”

Eve was ecstatic. But Challoner’s instant thought was, “What the devil will Edyth say to that?” Already he began to associate her with the raising of difficulties, and there is no more fatal bar to comradeship or affection.

During tea their liveliness subsided. Before it ended, Challoner

was called away — to Edyth's vexation and his own relief. She was getting on his nerves to-day.

His Indian visitor proved to be an educated Mahomedan of respectable family; a man he had known for years. His tale was the too common tale of 'reformed' India where the disloyal few persecute with impunity the loyal many, who will neither agitate nor non-coöperate: — a tale of ostracism and boycott in ways that only the Eastern can conceive.

He had come to Challoner, as to a proven friend — the 'right-hand arm' of the Sirkar. And Challoner, raging at his own impotence, in the face of modern conditions, could only explain how the hands of the Sirkar were tied, promise to consult the Burra Sahib, and see what could be done in the matter of employment.

"Come again next Sunday, my friend," he said, at parting. "And rest assured I will do all I can."

Exit Mahomed Hussein, all smiles and benedictions, leaving behind him a heavy-hearted Englishman, so deeply troubled over the whole Indian position that he sat staring at an open letter from Mrs. Vane on his desk, without taking in a word of it.

Before post-time, he wanted to answer that, and write a long screed to his friend Purvis at Simla, with the case of Mahomed Hussein for text. He had written six lines, when he was checked by Edyth's voice at the door.

"Ian — are you free now?"

"Yes — what is it?" But he did not lay down his pen. Trenchant sentences thronged his brain. "Can't I finish my letters first?" Inspecting her over his glasses, he saw at once he had said the wrong thing.

"Oh, well — by then, I shall be going to church. I've been waiting for a chance. But *my* affairs are always *de trop*. Yet you can waste endless time fooling about with Eve."

"I don't regard playing with Eve as waste of time. I've wasted too much time *not* playing with her, the last six years. We always seem at odds on that question."

Offended by his manner, Edyth moved back a step.

"Well, I only wanted to consult you. But if you're so specially busy, I must act as *I* think best — that's all."

At the hint of threat in her tone, he laid aside his pen.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, let's get it over. Please go and sit down."

She would have preferred her dignified retreat; but there was a note in his voice that even she did not care to disobey. She installed herself leisurely in his armchair.

"Well, what's the trouble now?" he asked.

Something in his manner made her fling her bomb without warning.

"I want to get rid of Rahāt Ali and have a Goanese cook."

"What's wrong with Rahāt Ali?"

"He can't speak English, and I'm bad at Hindustani. It puts one at a disadvantage."

"Quite so. I'll engage a Munshi for you."

"I don't want a Munshi, thank you." Very dignified; her head in the air. "I want a Goanese cook. Lots of other women have them. Rahāt Ali isn't good enough for dinner-parties. And Mrs. Chamier —"

"I'm sick of Mrs. Sham. She's not going to help you oust Rahāt Ali from my service. He suits me. And I'm not keen on needless expenses at present —"

"Then why did you spend hundreds of rupees on passages for Eve and Miss Minton?"

His face hardened at the familiar assault.

"We must agree to differ on that subject, Edyth. It isn't arguable. It's a case of personal values. And you forget — I sold the little car. But the point is, you're asking me to dismiss — gratuitously — a thoroughly good cook, who has served me loyally for ten years, at a time when loyal Indians need every ounce of encouragement from us to atone for official cold-shouldering. And all because you won't trouble to rub up the language. My answer is, I'll gladly help you with the language, but I won't chuck Rahāt Ali."

His opposition merely hardened her. His arguments passed clean over her head.

"Well, *I* can't go on like this. He and Faizullah are hand in glove. They must have been fleecing you freely for years. And if

a woman mayn't choose her own cook without having the British Empire rammed down her throat —"

She saw no humour in her remark. She only saw his maddening half smile, and felt angrier than ever.

"In England," he said quietly, "it would be quite another matter."

"Well, if I'm only to be a figurehead, if you *prefer* being cheated by a couple of native servants — I'd better go back to England, where I *can* be some use."

The look he turned on her made her feel half afraid she had gone too far.

"Rather early days to bolt, Edyth, after the years it's taken you — screwing yourself up to come out."

She tacked her sails skilfully. "Ian — you *know* how difficult it was — in lots of ways."

"I know how little you wanted to come."

His directness was positively dismaying.

"Well — now I have come, it isn't kind . . . throwing things in my face."

"No. It isn't. I never meant to," he said in a gentler tone.

It was true. She had goaded him into it.

His change of manner surprised her. Coming closer, she laid a persuasive hand on his shoulder.

"Dear old boy, I hate bothering you. But you don't know the difference it would make."

He sighed wearily. "You've got me in a cleft stick. To satisfy you, I'll see if I can manage it, without upsetting the old man. Now, do let me get on with these."

"Dear Ian — thank you."

Stooping to kiss a corner of his forehead, her eye lighted on the signature of a letter lying near his hand.

"Vanessa Vane! What a theatrical name! Is that the Mrs. Vane you made friends with in Kashmir?"

Challoner, though taken aback, gave no sign.

"Yes. She's living up there. I hope you'll be friends with her too . . ."

"Is she nice?" (It was Edyth's one, all-embracing adjective.)

"She's charming."

"Does she often write?"

"No."

A portentous pause; then curiosity conquered.

"May I — read it?"

"Certainly — if you're interested."

While she read it, he sat motionless staring at his big carved ink-pot, dismayed at the intensity of his own sensations. He could hardly bear the idea of her reading that entirely innocuous letter — whether on her own account or on Mrs. Vane's he did not ask himself.

Edyth, standing at his elbow, had a feeling that her request had been tactless. And the moment he consented, curiosity evaporated. She skimmed the letter and laid it down without comment.

He seemed not to notice. He sat looking straight before him. Fancying he was still annoyed with her, she touched his shoulder again.

"Ian, I'm sorry it bothers you — about the cook. But after all . . . your own wife . . ."

"Yes — my own wife!" he echoed bitterly. "From anyone else, I'd mind it less. Here am I, slanging the Government for discouraging loyal Indians; and here are you . . ."

"But you *will* think it over?" she interrupted shamelessly, unconcerned for the woes of loyal Indians, fearful only lest she had lost her point.

"Oh, yes, I'll think it over."

And on that, she left him — to his unfeigned relief.

Instead of finishing his letter to Purvis, he picked up the other one and re-read it, savouring afresh its individuality and charm. A passing grumble at the unsatisfactory Kashmiri servant flashed a happy idea into his brain. Why not ask her to take over Rahāt Ali (old Rahāt Lakoum, as she called him). It would ease matters if he could mark his appreciation of the man's faithful service by recommending him to a friend; and she had got on the soft side of him at Sonamarg. Better wire at once: and the nickname would come in handy. Never do for the compound to guess.

Extracting a telegraph form from its pigeon-hole he wrote:

Urgent. Reply paid.

Could you take on old Turkish Delight if available? It would be a real kindness. Letter explains.

CHALLONER

He flattered himself that was cryptic enough to defy Shere Ali. But she would understand. And she would not fail him. Even so, it would be detestable; but — to give Edyth a chance, he felt bound to do what he could. Mrs. Chamier would have had the shock of her life could she have guessed at the curses coupled with her name by the Revenue Commissioner of Peshawur.

He shouted for Shere Ali, and despatched the message. Then he settled down to finish his Simla screed and to write the letter that explained.

Next day came her answer.

Should be delighted. Many thanks for suggestion.

V. V.

He pocketed the thin slip of paper with a wry smile.

“Lucky devil, Rahāt Lakoum,” was his impermissible thought.

CHAPTER FIVE

*At last we parley: we, so strangely dumb
In such a close communion.*

GEORGE MEREDITH

EDYTH CHALLONER — very dignified and well-tailored on horseback — trotted leisurely along the Mall in the wake of Eve and Kaye. The slant sun of early morning flung massive shadows of bungalows and lean shadows of tree-trunks across the wide road. There was a nip of frost in the air, a jingle of harness as a couple of *sowars* cantered past — resplendent; a bugle-call from one of the Messes; the stirring note of a trumpet from the Cavalry lines. Fewer of these to-day, for it was Thursday — the one week-day morning on which the soldier, in India, is privileged to sleep late and take his rest.

Kaye was up and out, mainly on account of Eve. Edyth was up and out — against the grain — because Eve must not be allowed to run round with young men, however brotherly. She herself had never been much of a rider. It was Eve who usually went out with her father. But Ian had been away at Kohat for three days, scouring the district; and because Edyth dreaded being left alone with the servants, he had requisitioned Kaye to sleep in the bungalow. Eve — crazed on her early rides — had been told she must wait till Daddy's return. But being a young woman of resource, she had captured Kaye for Thursday; and even Edyth perceived that objections would be puerile.

They had turned off, now, past the Indian Cavalry lines, to the Circular Road, between fortified quarter guards and the open plain that swept away to the Khyber Pass and the Frontier hills. Over there, wild, lawless tribesmen — born thieves and murderers. Over here, their sons and brothers, eating the King's salt, drilled in his service. And between them, nothing more formidable, in the way of defence, than a mud wall and that tangle of barbed wire. No wonder rifles were stolen — and other things happened. Ian never said much, but she knew there had been

a raid on the bank in the city; that the place was in a ferment; the Police on the alert. No one in Peshawur seemed to trouble; but it hovered in her mind persistently — that sense of unsafety in the air.

They were nearing a rather lonely bungalow. She had been there once with Mrs. Chamier to call on a Mrs. Finlay, whose husband was a Captain in the I.M.S.

Eve and Kaye were passing the low compound wall. They had suddenly stopped. Kaye was leaning sideways in his saddle.

Eve gave a little scream: "Mummy! Oh, Mummy, come quick!"

Edyth cantered up. She was hardened to Eve's excitements about nothing. But there was Kaye, out of his saddle, flinging the Scooter's bridle to Eve; vaulting the low wall and crouching behind it . . .

Edyth's heart gave a hurried double knock. "*What* is it, Eve?" she asked, not looking towards Kaye.

"It's a woman — all crumpled up . . . in her dressing-gown . . ."

Kaye was back over the wall again, his face very grave, a blaze of anger in his eyes. He stood close to her saddle, his back to Eve, and spoke rapidly in a low tone.

"There's been some devil's work here. Mrs. Finlay's unconscious — badly pulled about. If you'll stay by her — do what you can, I'll run to the bungalow. I can't make out . . . Quick, please — "

He put up his hands — a stern, imperative look on his young face; and as he lifted her from the saddle she felt like a rat caught in a trap.

"I'll tether the Scooter. And I'll send a sais," he was saying in the same queer tone.

"Mayn't I get down?" Eve pleaded. She had caught a word here and there; and felt the more thrilled because she was secretly terrified.

"Not yet. You hang on to Belinda," Kaye commanded — such a strange, stern Kaye, that she dared not say another word.

He tethered the Scooter — and left them, at a run; left Edyth standing near the whitewashed gateposts; outwardly composed;

inwardly shrinking in every nerve. Horror or tragedy affected her too unpleasantly for sympathy to enter in; by a subconscious, self-protective instinct, she hardened her heart.

There — in the shadow of the wall — lay a still, huddled-up something that was Mrs. Finlay — a plain, uninteresting woman, whom she scarcely knew; her hair all dishevelled and one arm flung out as if she had pushed someone away. Her arm was in shadow, her hand in full sunlight; the bruised flesh grazed and bleeding, the third finger pulled back as if it were dislocated. A speck of light glinted in the gold of her wedding-ring. Had they broken her finger, snatching off the others?

A shiver of more than distaste chilled her. She could not shift her eyes from that horrible hand. What had happened there in the bungalow? Why had they left her after dragging her out here . . . ?

It was only a minute or two that she stood so. But it seemed an age.

As she moved forward, mechanically, two riders cantered up — Chris Chamier and Captain Piper. She recognised them with a throb of relief.

“Good God!” the policeman cried — and was out of the saddle at once, confronting her across the low wall, while she explained.

“You didn’t see the men — you don’t know how long — ?”

“No — nothing.”

Two saises came running at top speed. One of them secured the ponies of Piper and Chris. The girl dismounted, and hurried round to join Edyth: Piper pounced on the second man, who told him, in the vernacular, all he knew. Four *badmashi* Pathans from the hills had entered the bungalow, while the Captain Sahib was dressing. They had killed the Sahib, taken away the Memsa-hib and frightened the Missie-baba out of her wits. Already the bearer had carried word to the police *thāna* . . .

Chris was kneeling by the huddled-up figure, not heeding Mrs. Challoner, who stood beside her making tentative remarks.

Eve, chafing in the road, beckoned imperiously to the old sais, handed over the ponies and slipped out of the saddle. No Kaye to forbid her now.

But, as she ran through the gate, he reappeared with little Gwen Finlay in his arms; behind him an ayah with a bowl and two men carrying a shutter. Why . . . ? He didn't look stern now. Poor little Gwen was clinging to him, sobbing all the time.

Eve reached her mother as Kaye set down the child — an elfin creature of seven — shaken with terror and crying convulsively, “Daddy — Daddy . . . !”

“Captain Finlay?” Edyth asked. (She had only half caught the man's tale.)

“Done in,” Kaye answered briefly. “Brutes they are — Take her, please. Keep her from her mother.”

His gaze shifted to Chris, who sprang up and hurried to him, demanding brandy. He handed her the dead man's flask. He had not seen her for days; and her welcoming smile, like a light suddenly unveiled, stirred and troubled him, even while his surface brain was intent on Mrs. Finlay and the sobbing child. Mrs. Challoner seemed fond of children, but you couldn't rely on her; and she looked a bit queer. What was the damn use of patting the poor little thing's head and telling it not to cry?

Turning away, he touched Eve's shoulder and said, very low: “Be good to Gwen. They've killed her Daddy.”

“I know. I *heard* you.”

The intensity of her tone took him aback.

“She's the Colonel's kid, every bit of her,” was his thought, as Eve knelt and flung her arms round the child, murmuring soft words, tears running down her face.

Gwen clung to her, and they cried in sympathy, heedless of Edyth's murmured remonstrance: “Eve, dear, don't. You'll only make her worse.”

But Eve was making her better — and she knew it. Mummy never understood. That was the root of the whole matter. Edyth really felt sorry for the ‘poor little thing’; but the divine mother-gift of consolation was not in her. She was handicapped by the mental blindness of the unimaginative. Her fondness for children other than her own was a surface affair; and even her own, she loved better than she understood.

Kaye went over to Piper, who was questioning the two serv-

ants. They had exchanged only a few sentences, when Chris stood at his elbow.

"Kaye," she said, "Mrs. Finlay's wandering in her head. We ought to get a doctor."

"Yes. I'm going," Piper said briskly — and Kaye was glad. "We'll get her in first, poor lady."

But at the touch of men's hands, she struggled to free herself, with pitiful, broken sentences in Hindustani — dreadful to hear. Their English voices quieted her; and they moved off, followed by the weeping ayah.

Edyth, genuinely upset, felt more than ever anxious to get away.

"I think," she ventured, "I'd better take Eve home."

"So do I," Chris agreed with decision, longing to be quit of her. "Come along, Gwen, darling."

She gathered the piteous mite into her arms. And Edyth at last achieved her escape.

The prosaic comfort and safety of breakfast — steaming hot in silver dishes — was balm to Edyth's shaken soul; a buffer between her and hideous unrealities — that were yet not unrealities. Such horrors were unusual — but they happened. They might even happen to her; a possibility more unnerving than poor Mrs. Finlay's actual tragedy.

The hovering presence of Faizullah and the under-*khit* made her feel positively creepy. She could hardly swallow her food; but she made a fair pretence of it, on account of Miss Minton. Mercifully Eve did not seem upset. No doubt she only half understood. She was not really a sensitive child.

Miss Minton was told the bare facts — when the servants were absent; and was not encouraged to ask for more. Edyth felt convinced it would frighten her out of her wits. She would bolt straight home.

And all the while, the poor little lady was pining for details; not daring to ask. Under her colourless exterior, she possessed more imagination than Edyth Challoner and less fear. This was the sort of thing for which she had really come out to India —

and she felt defrauded. But Eve would surely tell her more, when they were alone.

The likelihood of that also occurred to Edyth, who forestalled it by delaying the child — when she and Miss Minton were going off to lessons in the back verandah.

“Eve, dear,” she said impressively, “don’t go talking to Miss Minton . . . about all that.”

“But, Mummy — *why* not?”

The challenging directness of her gaze took Edyth aback. The child was ridiculously like Ian, at times.

“Because I don’t wish it,” was all she said. “And you must do as you’re told.”

“O — oh!”

There was no conviction in her tone; and she hurried away, latent disobedience in her heart. Mummy was a horrid bother with her everlasting ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts.’ Eve had been feeling she could talk out her sad confused thoughts to ‘Sminky. If she *was* a bit sloppy sometimes — she understood how you felt.

Edyth, left alone, shirked the half-hour in the ‘go-down,’ with Anthony, her glib Goanese cook. She gave him the key, and said he could take what he wanted. He was such a superior man. She could trust him, as she never trusted the others.

Then she sat and waited for Ian in the armchair by the drawing-room fire.

He was late; and she felt more than ever insecure without a man in the house. Besides, she wanted him. He had been much nicer lately: and household affairs had gone more smoothly since the departure of Rahāt Ali. Though Ian had not said much, he had let her see how bad he felt over it, in spite of giving in.

It was one of the many puzzling things about him, the way he fussed over these natives, and their feelings, as if they were his nearest relations. It was undignified and ridiculous — men like Ian wasting their energy and zeal on men like Faizullah. And how much use was it? Look at the horrible things they did! Men with faces like Faizullah had murdered Captain Finlay and nearly dragged his wife away into those awful mountains . . .

The more she pushed the hideous affair from her, the more re-

lently she pursued her. She had only to shut her eyes, and it sprang upon her — that vision of Mrs. Finlay huddled in the shadow; her hand, in bright sunlight — the bruises and the torn skin and the broken finger . . .

The shock had waked all that she possessed of imagination. Vividly, in fancy, she saw those Pathans dashing into *her* bedroom — killing Ian; clutching her body with their horrible black hands. Eve would be plucky and aggressive. They would take her, too! . . .

A physical shiver ran through her, sitting there before her great log fire.

What on earth had happened to Ian? Had they murdered *him*? . . .

What was that? Her heart stopped beating.

Thank God — the purring of the car!

That instant of terror stirred her placid feeling for him to a passing fervour. He would be tired: she must keep hold of herself — not let him see . . .

She was on her feet when he entered, with the chill of Peshawur fever on him, aggravated by the long drive from Kohat through the mists of early morning.

On the Mall he had met Colonel Chamier and heard the news with which the whole station was astir. He devoutly hoped Edyth had not heard it yet. But the manner of her greeting told him that his hope was vain.

“Darling Ian” — her fingers closed on his arm — “you look perished. Come to the fire!”

He came, hunching his shoulders and rubbing his hands.

“I want my breakfast. I had *chota hazri* at Kohat, before seven.”

“Have you told Faizullah?”

“Yes.”

He wondered: “Does she know?” He would scarcely be ‘Darling Ian’ if she did not.

Almost as if he had spoken, she turned and said, in a contained voice: “Ian — I’ve had the most awful experience.”

“*You* — what?”

In brief sentences and a shaken voice — she told him.

He heard her out in silence; cursing his persistent ill-luck that she, of all people, should have run into such a horror. And Eve — the light of his eyes —

She saw how that smote him; and she felt half glad. It might make him more tolerant of her own shakiness, which she could not hide altogether, do what she would.

He was more than tolerant. He was sympathetic, as he only knew how to be when things were really bad — from which she drew her private conclusion that the state of India was a good deal worse than he chose to admit.

He didn't say much, but he held her close, pressing her head against his own, the tips of his fingers moving gently in the hair above her ear; and the feel of them, that way, stirred sleeping memories. There was a thrill in his touch, always; and, to-day, it gave her a blessed sense of safety and well-being.

"A brutal business," he said. "It would have been unthinkable ten or twelve years ago. They're sapping authority out here, at the fountain head — and *we* pay the price."

"Won't they get the men?"

"I doubt it. They're slippery devils. Where's Eve?"

"Out there, at lessons. Not a bit upset. She's a queer child."

"She's plucky. But it will stick in her mind."

"Oh, I don't think so. I told her she mustn't talk about it to Miss Minton. But I'm afraid she will. She's not very obedient. And you're spoiling her, Ian."

"Some call it one thing. Some call it another," he said, smiling cryptically. "There's not much wrong with Eve. But where's that breakfast?"

The musical note of his Burmese gong answered him; and Edyth stood away, feeling surprisingly strengthened and comforted.

"Don't bother. You sit quietly here."

"Oh, no. I'd rather be with you."

He laughed and slipped a hand through her arm.

They sat down. Faizullah handed dishes and hovered in the background. The feel of his silent presence gave Edyth the

creeps again. For the hundredth time she privately anathematised this hateful country. It had always come between them. It always would. If only she could manoeuvre Ian away!

She poured out his second cup of tea and passed it to him. Their hands met — and she started.

“Why, you’re still cold.”

“A touch of malaria. Breakfast’ll warm me.”

But before the meal ended, she saw plainly that he was ill.

“Ian,” she said, “you’ve got fever on you. You ought to be in bed.”

Her voice had its maternal note of authority.

“Well, I’m not. And you won’t get me there!” He defied her, not displeased at her concern. “I’ve taken a stiff go of quinine. I’ll get through my papers all right by the fire.”

When she had installed him there, with a low table at his elbow, he shouted for Faizullah and slippers. His shout brought Eve to the verandah doorway.

“Daddy!”

She stood gazing at him, her whole face radiant.

Even her unobservant mother was struck, at times, by the fervour of feeling Eve could compress into that word: and this morning it awakened a dim doubt whether John and Beryl really cared for *her* like that? Were they perfectly happy without her now? Did even Tony ever think of her unless Carl reminded him . . . ?

Eve had flung herself onto her father’s knee. She was throttling him with her arms, while he kissed and caressed her hair.

Edyth, with her foot on the fender, staring into the fire, wondered — ‘Is she remembering — that? Thinking — it might have been him? Was she more upset than she seemed to be?’

When Faizullah appeared with the slippers, Ian made as if he would shift the child, but she resisted. Of course, he gave in to her; only smiled and tweaked her hair. The way they went on made her feel out of it.

Even Faizullah was in it; crouching at his master’s feet, feeling his socks to make sure they were dry. Watching him, hating him, she suddenly wanted to push him aside and attend to Ian herself.

If pain and horror repelled her, lesser ailments drew out the best in her. Ian's touch of fever made her feel pleasantly necessary to his well-being; and the other two were very much in the way. It was a fact he did not realise that his detachment, his apparent self-sufficiency, had always checked in her the very qualities that became her best . . .

In the verandah doorway Miss Minton hovered discreetly, half anxious to reclaim her impetuous pupil, half fluttering in sentimental sympathy over Eve's wonderful devotion to her father. It was quite pretty to see them; and after that terrible story, she felt thankful to have the Colonel back. She was shy of interrupting; but duty was duty; and 'Sminky had a sturdy conscience, if she did suffer from occasional flabbiness of heart.

"How about lessons, dear — ?" she murmured, with a tentative glance at Mrs. Challoner, who backed her up on principle — being in the mood.

"Ian . . . don't you think — ?"

But Eve was clinging to him, shivering all through; and Ian looked up sharply.

"Let her alone," he said; whereat Miss Minton vanished, heartily wishing she had obeyed the promptings of sentiment.

The child was shivering still. Ian held her closer and kissed her hair.

"*What* is it, darling?" he asked, such depths of tenderness in his voice as his wife had rarely heard.

Eve lifted a strained, set face from his shoulder. "D'you know about it, Daddy?"

"Yes, I know."

Her lips trembled. "It's Gwen . . . I keep *on* thinking of Gwen. She's got *no* Daddy —"

That broke her up. Tears rained. She clung to him, kissing him fervently; and Edyth, more than ever out of it, felt genuinely distressed.

"Poor lamb! That hit her hard — I might have known," she thought, half vexed with herself; and, turning away, she went over to the writing-table.

Neither of them seemed aware of her. She had never seen them

like that together. Ian mainly showed his affection by chaffing the child and humouring her. This was different. It gave her a twinge of jealousy. Eve's unhappiness troubled her. But Ian had fever. The child was upsetting him. And she wanted him to herself . . .

"No more lessons this morning," she heard him say. "Ask 'Smiddy from me to take you over to the Murchisons."

And of course Eve murmured: "*Can't* I stay with you?"

"Not now, little woman. I've work to do. I'll play with you this evening."

She acquiesced meekly; and he kissed her again.

When she was gone, Edyth came back to the fireplace; and Ian looked up at her, an odd light in his eyes; but he said nothing. She could see that his temperature must be rising, and promptly took command of the situation.

"Leave your papers alone, dear, and lie back for a little. I'll make you a lime squash."

She put a cushion behind his head, and he closed his eyes. He felt too ill to work, too enraged over that brutal affair — and its effect on them both. Edyth was plucky; not making a fuss. But the thing would take hold of her. If she was negative, she was tenacious. An idea once lodged in her head could only be ejected with dynamite!

He watched her preparing the lime squash; intent on extracting pips; charmingly maternal; and his estranged heart suffered a pang of self-reproach.

"Thank you, dear," he said, and emptied the long tumbler almost at a draught.

She set a plate of grapes at his elbow; and, quite unaggressively, took possession of him for the rest of the morning; insisted on taking his temperature, inserting the thermometer as though he were a child.

If his submission was tinged with amusement, he was none the less genuinely moved by these wifely attentions. Curiously enough, he found himself readier to appreciate and respond than in former days . . .

By Nature's own paradox, his awakened feeling for one woman

seemed perversely to quicken his eye for the merits of the other.

True, it was the companion-wife he needed; but here was Edyth, and here was he — thankful for almost any circumstance that might draw their diverse natures nearer together. Her surface tenderness was very lovable — while it prevailed; though he knew, from experience, that, if you leaned on it unwarily, you were apt to get let down. Nevertheless, being man — and feeling ill — it pleased him.

Once, when she leaned over and passed a cool hand across his forehead, he captured it and laid it against his cheek.

“You’ve some use for me — when you can turn me into an extra child?”

Her eyes half owned up. Her lips never would.

“Ian, that’s unfair. You know it’s just . . . they seem to need one more.”

“That’s to say they make more clamour about it?”

She frowned distressfully. “I don’t like you when you talk like that.”

“Because it’s true.”

“It isn’t true.” She was thinking of Beryl and John. “They don’t clamour much. They seem quite happy.”

“Would you have them otherwise?”

She coloured faintly. “Of course not. But, naturally —”

“Yes — naturally . . . ! Did it give you any satisfaction to know that I was . . . more or less unhappy . . . all those years alone?”

“Ian! You never told me . . .”

“I tried to — now and then. But — it seemed to me, you didn’t want to hear.”

Her colour deepened. It was his first direct allusion to the subject. “I never meant . . . to seem like that. And I’ve come now. Can’t you forgive me?”

“My dear! As to that . . .” He pressed her hand. “Forgiving’s simple enough. It’s not so simple to undo . . .”

She looked down at him, vaguely troubled, vaguely moved; and he looked back at her, smiling with his eyes. Suddenly she

stooped and kissed his forehead, and he caught the gleam of tears.

"What is it, Edyth?" he asked gently.

"Only . . . the way you smile . . . so like Tony . . ."

She turned quickly, but he caught her hand. Time they had it out.

"You poor dear! But it was your own doing, you know."

"It wasn't . . . I couldn't . . . You don't understand . . ."

"How can I — if you won't explain? Can't you see it's a bit hard on me — and Tony, the way you go on? Except that I'm technically his father, we're utter strangers — and likely to remain so. A pity for the boy, don't you think? And not very pleasant for me to feel I wouldn't know my own son, if I met him. Besides — for your own sake . . . I did my best. But you're so damned obstinate."

She snatched away her hand and covered her face. The tears she had been battling with overflowed.

"Oh, Ian . . . don't swear at me to-day," she murmured. "I'm — I'm all to pieces —"

"Edyth, my dear — I'm not swearing at you!" His lips twitched in spite of his distress. She was so oddly sensitive to his infrequent 'damns.' Of course, he had spoken too hotly. The thing had been bottled up too long.

He put up his hand and took hold of her arm. "Sit down, dear. I can't get near you."

Without a word, she dropped upon the floor-cushion beside him and hid her face on the arm of his chair. She was shaken with sobs. He could only stroke her hair, and put a protecting arm round her shoulders till she grew quieter.

"Was it as bad as all that?" he said at last. "And you didn't want me to see? Very plucky of you. But much better have it out. Don't let it haunt you, Edyth. It will pass."

She said nothing. She probably did not believe him; and he only half believed himself.

At his wits' end how to console her, he suddenly thought of the boy. If he could persuade her *now* — !

"Look here, dear," he said. "About Tony. Why go on break-

ing your heart over him? We both want him. And it's not too late. Your Carl could bring him along before we leave. He'd be all right up there. And just think — the comfort it would be."

That checked her sobs; but she did not look up. She was distractedly thinking — thinking — the comfort it would be. But her dread of India, her grudge against it for that early loss, remained unshaken; and when she lifted her tear-wet face, he knew he had failed.

"Ian — please understand, I can't . . . I won't bring Tony out here."

"Well, I *don't* understand," he flung out, half angered by her persistence. "You're simply making a martyr of yourself — for no real reason that *I* can see."

"No *real reason!*" It was her turn to be angry. "If you've forgotten — Eldred — *I* never can. My Tony's safe in England. I won't bring him out — to this country of horrors. How you could suggest it — *to-day!*"

"Oh, Lord," he groaned. "That's it, is it?"

He no longer failed to understand. He was up against something bigger than her obstinacy — and he was correspondingly dismayed.

"Of course, I've not forgotten. I just — didn't see it that way. There's no safety anywhere, my dear, in this dangerous world. But, of course — if that's it . . . I won't ask you again. You mothers are wonderful things."

To his surprise she put her arms round his neck and kissed him, her wet cheek pressed against his.

"Why on earth didn't you say it straight out?" he asked, still puzzled.

"I thought — you wouldn't understand . . ."

There were sounds outside, as of a possible caller. She rose hurriedly, dabbing her eyes.

"I must go and wash my face. Tell Faizullah — not at home." She hesitated, looking down at him. "I'm — I'm so ashamed. I've upset you worse than Eve."

He smiled. "My fault. I started it. Don't worry about me."

When she had gone, he leaned back and closed his eyes *again*.

She had upset him worse than Eve. If he was up against an India 'complex,' on account of poor little Eldred, it was a matter for serious consideration . . .

At present, he could do nothing. He could only hope she might be happier in Kashmir.

That night, his fever ran high; and Edyth took charge of him, holding Faizullah at bay. For the next two days she managed to keep him in bed; and, in spite of physical miseries, they were the pleasantest two days he had known since her return.

CHAPTER SIX

*We two have taken up a lifeless vow,
To rob a living passion; dust for fire!*

GEORGE MEREDITH

SIR ALTON RAYNE, Chief Commissioner of the North-West Frontier Province, was a small, keen-faced man, dry as the skin of an almond, yet at heart a dynamo of compressed energy. Like Challoner, he had spent most of his service on the Border. Like Challoner, also, his knowledge of that stark, virile strip of country — so vitally distinct from India proper — amounted almost to a sixth sense; consequently, in the Looking-Glass World of the New Councils, he was regarded as entirely the wrong man to guide its destinies. By some fortunate oversight, however, he had not yet been shifted elsewhere.

The two men had been a good deal thrown together in former days: and the renewal of their friendly intimacy at Peshawur had been a very real pleasure for both.

They were sitting together now, in Rayne's spacious *duster*, frankly talking 'shop.' A *chit* from Rayne had brought Challoner in, on his way home from the Courts, where he had been settling wearisome, interminable disputes as to landmarks and land-values; giving ear to the sins of *zemindars* and the blacker sins of *bunnias*. It was a relief to spend half an hour with Rayne, in the wider atmosphere of tribal turbulence that suggested the secret hand of Afghanistan on the wires. There had been recent daring attacks on British Indian villages; a successful raid on the bank in Peshawur City; and now, the murder of Finlay in his own bungalow — ! Happily, Mrs. Finlay had recovered from the shock of her rough handling, thanks, in a measure, to the devoted services of Chris Chamier, the acknowledged heroine of the affair. According to Finlay's servants, the *badmashis* were Afridis, from the hills. Either they had taken fright, or they could not burden themselves with an unconscious woman.

For nearly two weeks, the Police had been on the alert, but the chances were ten to one against catching the criminals. And if that sort of thing could be carried on with impunity . . .!

Rayne flung out his hands in a gesture of despair.

"I don't blame the Police. Worst paid, best abused lot o' men in the country. God knows where we'd be if they'd served the Government, these years, as the Government has served them. Loyalty doesn't pay — and they know it. Once the rot sets in among their British officers —!"

Challoner's shrug was as significant as the other's gesture; and they both smoked awhile in silence, considering how swiftly — in the sacred name of progress — the uphill work of more than a century was disintegrating before their eyes.

From the dilemmas of progressive India, Rayne turned, with relief, to the minor personal problem of their latest cold-weather guest — a young journalist, touring Northern India on a special correspondent trip, in connection with 'Red' propaganda. He brought letters of introduction from a newspaper magnate, an old school-fellow of Rayne's. So ten days at Government House, with every facility for seeing and hearing, was the least they could do for him; and they were doing it, with Anglo-Indian thoroughness and zeal.

"Not a bad chap. Sense of humour groggy. But he genuinely wants to know, don't cher know?" Sir Alton summed him up in his brisk, chippy sentences. "And we're doing our damndest to keep him on the rails. That reminds me — there's a bit of a hitch this afternoon. Elsa promised to roll him through the city. But she's had him in tow all the morning. There's our dinner to-night too — (Don't you forget!) — and she's feeling below par. I say — 'Chuck it.' But she won't disappoint him. And it flashed on me — Mrs. Challoner's the very woman . . . if she'd be so kind. Any luck?"

"I'm sure she'd enjoy it," Challoner assented with alacrity. "She's not engaged, I know."

"It would be a real kindness. Elsa's been overdoing it. Both my right-hand young men are securely wedged in a polo match. Surprisingly popular they are this week, I notice!" He winked

good-humouredly. "And your wife's our latest from Home. She'll do us credit. Of course, if there's any hitch . . .?"

"Quite unlikely. But we'll let you know."

"Good man. Please convey our sincere gratitude and salaams. Sorry to shunt our *bāj* onto you. But I'm grateful — because of Elsa —"

"My dear Rayne — at this time of day — !"

Challoner's look said the rest; and he rose to take his leave with a pleasant sense of having hit it off all round.

His old friends had been so consistently kind to him during the years alone, that any trifling service he could render them gave him a satisfaction out of all proportion to the thing itself. Great luck that Edyth was free. The request might flatter her; and in any case he intended to press the point.

Things had not gone well this last week. She was never aggressive in her unpleasant moods; but she could be silently antagonistic to a maddening degree. Their brief spell of friendlier affection had petered out when the fever left him, and the daily round pushed its dusty trivialities between them again.

So it went on, inevitably — to and fro — the pendulum swing of their unstable yet indissoluble life together.

Socially she had come on a little, thanks to her Goanese 'treasure,' who was probably fleecing her as good old Rahāt Lakoum had never done. Admittedly, the plausible little beggar's entrées and savouries beguiled his own critical palate, and gave Edyth's dinners a certain *cachet*, which partly redeemed her unskilled blending of human elements. As dinners, they were admirable; as human gatherings, they lacked the vital spark. A faint chill of formality lay like a thin glaze over them all. People rarely lingered on, to all hours, as so often happened at the Raynes'. They came punctually; they went punctually. And it hurt him, for Edyth, that it should be so. But she always seemed satisfied with her own achievements; and complacency, however maddening, has its own peculiar advantages — for the complacent. She liked having people to the house, but was lazy about going to the Club, the focal point of Anglo-Indian social life. She preferred to be sought out in her own drawing-room.

He had told her flatly she would not be sought out; that her superior English airs would 'cut no ice' in India, as she ought to know without telling.

She had retorted that Anglo-Indians were restless and frivolous. She was an older woman now. She had got out of their ways. So Challoner had given up speaking. She must please herself — which she conscientiously did; find her own level in the cheerful, self-centred microcosm of Peshawur.

He sincerely hoped the Chief Commissioner's message would flatter her. She wasn't in the best of spirits this morning — and suddenly he remembered — it was mail-day!

He had entirely forgotten the stupendous fact. Mail-day was sacrosanct; devoted exclusively to Home letters and papers; and she, a creature withdrawn into herself, carrying her flag half-mast, her reddened eyelids hinting at secret tears. On mail-day, Anglo-India was not permitted to intrude.

Did it never occur to her, he wondered, that this weekly parade of tears and depression was a trifle inconsiderate to a luckless husband, who felt tacitly responsible for it all, who would feel ten times sorrier for her were she less patently sorry for herself? Too clearly he foresaw how it would be. He could only hope it might not be one of her worst days . . .

He found her in his big armchair before the fire immersed in letters and papers, her eyelids flushed, her handkerchief in evidence.

"Ian, how late you are!" she greeted him, a fretful note in her voice. But she made no move; and he intended to get through with it before tiffin.

Having explained the cause of his delay, he gave her Rayne's message and grateful salaams, implying that he had virtually assented for her, while she stared at the fire, only half attending, half hearing. Since she took refusal for granted, the details did not matter very much. Her weekly budget had been more than usually upsetting: an adorable little scrawl from Tony; lamentations from Beryl that her birthday had been 'utterly beastly rotten without Mumsie'; a long screed from Carl, who had a

gift of the pen, and exercised it freely. Ian and his Lady Rayne and his stray journalist were bloodless unrealities by comparison.

When he stopped speaking, she looked up with a worried frown.

"I'm sorry. But you know I *can't* . . . to-day. It's out of the question."

"That's not the sort of answer I can send to Lady Rayne."

"Oh, you know her so well. You can invent something polite. It's *your* fault — letting me in —"

"I've told you, they're in rather a fix. And they've been so good to me. I was only too glad." He added, with a wry smile: "For once I hoped I'd hit the mark. A newspaper man from Home, advanced opinions, and all the rest of it. I thought his talk would be very much to your taste."

She looked away from him. "Because you knew it wouldn't be — to yours?"

"Possibly. That didn't occur to me. The point is, I'm keen you should not refuse Rayne's request."

"Really, Ian!" To her, his persistence seemed pure perversity. "When you *know* I never go out on mail-day. I never make engagements . . ."

"Sorry I let you in. I'm afraid — I forgot about mail-day."

"But you saw the letters. How could you *possibly* forget —?"

"I've a pretty fair talent that way. And it wasn't *I* who forgot it, when *you* were at Home." She flinched at that. "Anyhow, I can't let Lady Rayne down. She's the most unselfish woman I know. I'll be honestly grateful, my dear, if you'll make an exception to your sacred rule, this once — as a particular favour to me."

She was silent for a breathing space, and he thought, "Have I actually done it?" But before she opened her lips he was answered.

"Ian, you know I can't. It's simply tactless of you, making me seem ungracious, when I'm all behind with my letters."

"I know you won't put yourself out one inch to please me or my friends."

"That's not true. Any other day — I'd be quite pleased. But if I start making exceptions, there'll be no end. Why not ask Mrs. Chamier? She'd jump at it."

“The Raynes wouldn’t jump at her.” His patience was fast giving out. “Old Chamier would be preferable. You can write yourself — at once, please. A line to Lady Rayne, too — making your own excuses.”

She rose at that; very dignified, annoyed at the suppressed temper in his tone.

“I’ll try and get one of the Chamiers; but *you* can write to Lady Rayne. She’s your friend. You made the muddle.”

“Damn!” he muttered, his patience exhausted, and walked straight out of the room.

Argument merely crystallised her cursed obstinacy. Left to herself, she would write both notes, if only from a sense of decorum.

And she did.

Lunch was one of those awkward meals, when friction is in the air and everyone tries not to look at anyone else. Challoner kept things going, spasmodically with the assistance of Eve, who wondered irreverently, ‘What *has* Mummy been doing now?’ Miss Minton, anxious to be correctly neutral, felt awkward and distressed over a state of tension more self-evident than usual. The ‘romance’ she had woven round the reunited pair did not seem to be moving along the prescribed lines at all.

When coffee arrived, Challoner emptied his cup at a draught and went out. Five minutes later he left the house, without looking in on Edyth, though he had heard her go back to the drawing-room.

It was not only her refusal, but the manner of it that angered him (perhaps unreasonably) as he had not felt angered since her return. Minor causes of friction had multiplied of late, emphasising and aggravating their innate incompatibility. It had always been there, more or less decently veiled. But at lunch he had been distastefully aware of Miss Minton’s awareness — and Eve’s, which was worse. It hurt him keenly, and it was bad for the child — watching and wondering and mentally taking sides; he saw it in her eyes. His own fault, Edyth would say, for dragging her out to India. Right and left, it was his fault always.

There were times when his earlier loneliness seemed almost desirable, compared with these recurrent rubs and jars, and the secret drag of his heart in another direction; times when he tasted to the full that isolation of spirit — more poignant than loneliness — which can be most acutely experienced in marriage, where true union is not . . .

Sitting at ease in his car, rolling along the sunlit Mall, these dark thoughts malignly pestered him. He knew them for a symptom that one of his black moods was on him, when life bore the aspect of a peculiarly malicious practical joke, a mood out of all proportion to the trivial disagreement that had stirred it from sleep.

The fact that their chronic disagreements were mainly trivial only made them the more galling; and the underlying antagonism was no trifle. Yet he knew himself capable, still, of genuine affection for her, if she would only give him — and India — a chance . . .

A mysterious state of life — marriage: the inexorable bond — essential to the race — set against Nature's equally inexorable law of development and change. A case of 'pull devil, pull baker' — and let the human heart hold out as best it may . . .

Two hours in *kutcherry*, deciding cases and hearing disputes, set his own dispute in a drier light; but did not incline him to return for tea. Inclination leaned to bridge at the Club, and easeful surface contact with his fellows.

Also he wanted to see Harland and hear how things were going with his *zemindar* friend Rustum Khan, whose innocence he had never doubted for a moment.

But the law in India — even with the Englishman paramount — is still largely a matter of the suborned witness and the skilfully greased palm. The hired corpse still does yeoman service, on occasion. In this case, if the corpse was genuine, Challoner could swear the witnesses were not; but undeniably things looked black for Rustum Khan, a brave man and a gentleman — up to his lights.

Challoner had been to see him in jail; and had heard his ver-

sion of the affair. Karim Khan — he declared — being routed that morning of the fracas, had quickly seen a way to get more than even with his enemy and add another corpse to his own reckoning in the matter of the feud. Cunning as the devil, he had doubtless brought the blind man to the spot and killed him with his own hand. Then he ran to the nearest police *thāna*, crying aloud that Rustum Khan had murdered his helpless old father and beaten with sticks his nephews and himself. It was a tale likely to command belief; and even his fellow Pathans would be slow to suspect the ugly truth.

To the verity of that statement, Rustum Khan had sworn by the Prophet's beard and the life of his son, adding ruefully: "The Judge Sahib would not believe such talk, *Hazūr*, even could I pay twenty witnesses to confound those twelve liars. In your Honour's heart, there is understanding of the Pathan people. But the white man does not know how to hate as we do; handing on that hatred from generation to generation, that revenge fail not, and be *izzat* maintained. Doubtless Karim Khan considered how his father was a blind man and old, with few more years to live."

"And doubtless you would have done likewise in his place?" Challoner had queried; aware that his vaunted knowledge of these people was a very little thing.

Rustum Khan would not so lightly commit himself. But, at parting, he had called down God's mercy on the Sahib for believing he spoke truth.

Belief or no, the witnesses had it all along the line. Challoner had worried over the case a good deal, while it dragged inconclusively on; and to-day it was very much on his mind. Piper, the policeman — also keenly interested — had an inkling of dramatic, eleventh-hour developments. Failing that, Rustum Khan had not a dog's chance — which was Harland's opinion in any case.

On entering the Club, Challoner spied the two in a far corner; Piper talking briskly, the bulky Divisional and Sessions Judge sucking at one of his abnormally long cigars.

Piper sprang up at sight of him.

"Cheerio, Colonel Sahib! You and I are top-dogs after all — not forgetting old Rustum Khan —"

“*Acquitted!*” Challoner shot a glance from one to the other.

“That’s it, sir,” said the little man. “And *you* can take half the credit, for putting old Rustum on to that wide-awake Vakil, Mahomed Hussein. I had a great buck with him afterwards. ‘Alone he did it.’ The Judge Sahib hasn’t got over it yet — have you, sir?”

“Brutal business. Unbelievable!” muttered Harland, jerking his cigar so that the ash was scattered on his redundant waist-coat.

“Nothing’s unbelievable on the Border,” said the man of over twenty years’ experience. “Let’s hear.”

He shouted for a peg and sat down, while Piper told how old Rustum’s Vakil — having vainly hustled the witnesses — had been smitten with a bright idea. There were ten of them; and each man’s tale opened with the set phrase, ‘That morning, as I was working in my field . . .’

A frosty gleam in Challoner’s eye told Piper he had pounced on the bright idea.

“Ten fields, all in view of the fracas!” The policeman winked back at him. “A bit of luck worth confirming! So off he sprinted to the village *putwarri*,¹ and demanded a map of the place; every field numbered. Turned up in Court to-day with a cool request for the witnesses to be recalled. Karim Khan’s face was a study, and the Court Babu made heavy weather with his polysyllables. But the Judge here wasn’t having any of that. Recalled they were; and down they all went, like a row of ninepins —”

“Shahbash, Mahomed Ali! And how many of ’em had fields at all?”

Piper grinned. “You know the breed, Colonel! Five of ’em. Two out of the five *might* have seen the scuffle at a pinch. For the other three it was a physical impossibility. The rest had been hired from a neighbouring village. And that slim scoundrel, Karim Khan — seeing he was dished — coolly owned up. The slickest *volte-face* you ever saw.”

The Judge grunted. “Callous devils they are! That man was within an ace of swinging on a false accusation. He gets acquit-

¹ Accountant.

ted by a miracle; and all he thinks of is that the additional corpse will be up to his family!"

Harland was new to the Frontier Province and the true inwardness of the gentle Pathan. But he rather fancied himself an authority on the criminal vagaries of the East. Challoner, though crime was outside his jurisdiction, had an extensive and peculiar knowledge of lurid Border dramas; and when these two started capping tales the little policeman found them worth listening to. Crime was his job; and he loved his job; though nowadays 'the Police' was fast becoming the most thankless and precarious Service in the whole Empire. For Piper, it still had compensations, barely visible to the naked eye: and at present he was enjoying himself down to the ground.

So was Challoner — in his own still fashion. The good news could scarcely have pleased him better had Rustum Khan been a personal friend of his own race. That is how some Englishmen are made; and they are the Englishmen who have made India. Talking shop with the friends of his spurious bachelor days he felt — perversely and ungratefully — his own man again. Edyth and Home letters and domestic discords were thrust right out of his mind — a faculty that had its uses and its dangers.

It was latish before they annexed Ryland of the I.M.S. for a fourth at bridge. Keen players all, equally matched, time and the world slipped round unheeded, while the cards passed and re-passed, and the men changed places at stated intervals . . .

It was more than latish when Challoner, during Harland's deal, casually consulted his watch.

"Eight o'clock!" he exclaimed. "By Jove, I'll be late for Mess."

His slip raised a laugh. It betrayed how completely his mind had slid back to old ways.

The big kindly Judge looked up from his cards. He was slow, but not dense; and he had noticed a change in his friend.

"You don't bolt in the middle of a rubber, if I know it! Stay and dine, and we'll carry on after dinner. Send a line to your Mem-sahib. You've been the exemplary Benedick all these weeks. Now then — here you are!" He held out a gold pencil case.

Piper produced half a sheet of note-paper.

"You *must* stay, Colonel. We'll drink to old Rustum and Mahomed Hussein."

Challoner was tempted, undeniably: there was no time to think or haver. The men wanted to get on with their game.

"Thanks very much," he said — and wrote rapidly:

DEAR EDYTH:

Harland has pressed me to stay and dine. We've a good game on, so I hope you won't mind, once in a way. Sorry if I've kept you waiting. I overlooked the time. I'll be late. Yours,

I. K. C.

The relief it was to despatch that note made him feel heartily ashamed of himself. But the game required his undivided attention. The cards passed and repassed; and when it was over, they all adjourned for dinner . . .

The entrée had just been served when the doctor chanced to mention Goldring, having met him on his way to the city, with Colonel Chamier 'doing guide-book for all he was worth.'

That name touched a spring in Challoner's brain.

"Good God!" he cried. "I'm dining at Government House to meet him!"

"The devil you are!" quoth Harland, with his full-bodied chuckle. "Thought you were dining with me!"

"Sorry — it's a wash-out. I must move on — to the next show."

"Well, I'm damned! You've broken your own record, this time."

The general laugh was irrepressible; and Challoner took it in good part — though for him it was no laughing matter. Eight-thirty: and dinner was at eight-fifteen. No car; it had gone home with his *chit*. What the devil would Edyth make of it? Not a second to slip home and change. A dinner of fourteen — and he must face it in blue serge . . .!

As he pushed back his chair, Harland looked up, fully alive to the other side of the joke.

“Shout for my car, old man. And good luck to you.”

“Thanks — more than I deserve,” said Challoner, with his crooked smile.

“Bet Lady Rayne’ll see the fun of it. She’d forgive you anything.”

But it was Edyth, not his hostess, who troubled Challoner’s thoughts, as he strode away. After their fracas of this morning she would impute the unlikeliest motives — believe any fantasy rather than the truth . . .

As the car slid purring down the Mall, he could only pray Heaven they had not waited for him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A word spoken in due season, how good is it!

SOLOMON

INEVITABLY they had waited, in spite of Edyth Challoner's protests. She herself had waited, before starting, in a state of suppressed resentment out of all proportion to the offence. That Ian should have forgotten they were dining with his beloved Raynes was beyond belief. She had been aggrieved at his manner during lunch; still more so at his cavalier departure. All the afternoon she had felt dimly uncomfortable; dimly aware that she might have given way — this once. And she might have enjoyed herself — the sorest point of all.

Eventually, she had fallen back on the dog-cart, which she detested, especially at night; and arrived seven minutes late — minus her husband. It was disgraceful of him. She had never felt more awkward, more ill-used in all her life.

For her, a Government House dinner of fourteen was an important official function. For Lady Rayne — daughter of one Governor and wife of another — her party was a friendly, informal affair to give her guest a chance of airing his views on poor India and meeting some of the men who knew. She had collected the Challoners, the Chamiers, the D.C. and his wife, a lady doctor lately arrived, Captain Lenox, of course, for little Miss Chamier, and two extra officers to keep things cheery.

Edyth's apologies were accepted with an indulgent smile.

"I expect he got caught in a rubber," she suggested kindly, "and overlooked the time. Meanwhile — let me introduce to you our clever young man from Home."

The clever young man was unburdening himself to Chris, at the other end of the room; and Edyth, only half reassured, was left to placate the Chief Commissioner, with whom she never felt at ease.

Sir Alton, taking stock of her, only saw that she was thoroughly annoyed with her husband; and felt very sorry for his

friend. It was a more or less chronic sensation, dating from the fatal day, when Challoner — one of the best men he knew — had married Edyth de Wynton . . . presumably in a fit of abstraction that eclipsed all his minor achievements in that line. Poor old Ian was not going to be rattled on his account. By some means the lady must be persuaded off her pedestal. But she had the unfair advantage of height; with her natural dignity and her lamentable lack of humour for shield and buckler.

He was thankful when Elsa returned with young Goldring — who, it seemed, had met Mrs. Challoner in Town, two years ago, at one of Hensley Harrison's pen-and-ink tea-parties. Did she remember?

Of course she did. The name had passed her by this morning. She had not attended to half that Ian had said. At the magic words Hensley Harrison, constraint evaporated. She almost forgot the awful fact that Ian was keeping thirteen people — seven of them men — waiting for their dinner.

But, as the fatal pause lengthened, her wrath dissolved in anxiety; and at last she appealed to her host.

"Sir Alton . . . may I send a *chit* to the Club? *Please* don't wait any longer."

To pacify her, the note was despatched — and duly crossed Challoner as he sped along the Mall.

Then Sir Alton led her into the dining-room, still resolved to create a diversion in favour of his friend.

"Don't you worry, Mrs. Challoner," he said as they took their seats. "I'll lay you — ten to one — he stayed yarning at the Club and clean forgot our little show!" His hearty laugh reassured her. He seemed really to take it as a joke. "Been worrying a bit over that case lately, hasn't he?"

"What case?" she enquired, mildly curious.

His brows shot up. The question was illuminating.

"Oh — didn't he mention it? A *zemindar*-friend of his: up for murder. It's been on his mind a bit. And when he gets worrying, he gets wool-gathering — doesn't he? *You* could tell some tales, I expect?"

But her wrath and distress were not to be so lightly dispelled.

"He's never done anything as bad as this — that *I* know of," she murmured confidentially to her soup plate, lest Mr. Goldring overhear.

"Well, at that rate, he'll survive . . . to wear my shoes."

"Your shoes?" She looked round at him in blank surprise.

"Yes. Likely as not. The Border's his destiny. A man who knows it as he does is wasted elsewhere — which is probably why they cart him off! Peshawur will claim him again — one of these days."

"Oh, I hope not. I hate the Frontier —"

"It's heresy to say that — in *my* house, Mrs. Challoner," he took her up, an odd glint in his eyes. "The Border's the finest anvil I know for hammering out men. D'you talk that way to Challoner?"

"Well — I think he knows it."

"Poor devil!" Sir Alton muttered — which was rude of him. "Does that account — for Kashmir?"

"I really don't know." She drew herself up just perceptibly. "He didn't consult me. He's very fond of Kashmir."

"Quite. The change'll be good for him; though we're all selfish enough to regret it. Peshawur won't know itself without Challoner's latest."

"It's very kind of you to put it that way."

"Oh, Lord, no. I mean it. However, we need some of our best men in the Native States, just now. And he has a talent for the Asiatic. Chaffs 'em like children, but gives 'em scrupulous fair play. And never treads on their pet corns. They're half afraid of him, but they trust him out and out. It's a combination that goes all the way with these people. You'll be Lady Challoner before he leaves Kashmir!"

That revived her interest, which had wilted under his talk about Asiatics.

"D'you think so — really? That would be *very* nice," she murmured, visibly impressed. "I never thought . . . Of course, I know he's very clever, very keen. And he works so hard; but he doesn't know how to push —"

"*Push?*" ('By the Lord!' he thought, 'she's half ashamed of

him. I'll give her something to be ashamed of.') "My dear lady, you needn't worry on that score." He looked at her steadily a moment, realising her serene self-complacency; heartily wishing he could tell her straight that he regarded her as the one false step in Ian's career. "Your husband, let me tell you, is a very distinguished officer. He's one of those men whose brains are the least part of their quality. And those are the men for India. England could do with a few more of them, these days of self-advertisement and snapshots in the papers. If you mean that sort of thing — Challoner hasn't an ounce of it. But you can take my word he'll reach the top . . . Hullo! *There* you are!"

Sounds of arrival were followed by the bearer's guttural announcement: "Chull'ner Sahib *argya*."

Host and hostess rose at once; and Challoner, standing in the doorway, had a paralysing moment of shyness. At best, his height made him feel uncomfortably conspicuous, entering a room full of people. To-night he felt acutely so, by reason of his lapse, and his workaday suit.

While he was shaking hands with Lady Rayne, Sir Alton joined them.

"Own up, old man!" he said genially, patting his tall friend somewhere in the region of his shoulder. "I've a bet on with your wife. You clean forgot — eh? Urgent affairs of state!"

Challoner flashed a look at him. "Unpardonable of me. We had a game on. Harland pressed me to stay and dine. I sent a note to my wife." He glanced in her direction. To his surprise, she coloured faintly, and looked away from him.

"I never got it," she murmured. "I came in the dog-cart."

The dog-cart — and in evening dress! He had done for himself, all round.

As he sat down by his hostess, seven gleaming shirt-fronts derided his sober waistcoat. Never before had he properly appreciated the plight of the man without a wedding garment. Outwardly unabashed, he met the eyes of Tarrant — a smart British Cavalry Major, with every hair and every crease correctly in place. The dapper journalist man — over there by Edyth — would probably see his slip as proof of the supposed demoralisation wrought on Englishmen by service in India.

He twinkled at Chris and Kaye, who were frankly enjoying the joke; bowed ceremoniously to his neighbour, Mrs. Copeland, one of the officially-minded — who saw no joke to enjoy — and was only just in time to prevent kind Lady Rayne from inflicting soup, fish, entrée, on him all over again. He heard, with something more than amusement, that Goldring had met his wife in Town. ‘Serves her right,’ he thought. ‘She’d have thoroughly enjoyed herself.’

She seemed to be doing so now; deserting Rayne; quite lively; plenty to say.

In the intervals of telling Lady Rayne the strange tale of Rustum Khan, he took stock of the man who was apparently Edyth’s *jāt*, and felt antagonised at sight by the fellow’s prevailing smoothness — smooth, clean-shaven face; smooth, fair hair and polished expanse of forehead; one eyebrow kinked by a thick monocle that weirdly magnified an enquiring grey eye.

‘If I come up against him, I hope he keeps off politics,’ was Challoner’s passing thought. ‘Or sparks might fly!’

It was a vain hope, in that troubled year of grace, when Gandhi flourished unhindered and no man foresaw his fall. From the hills to the sea, the air of modern India is tainted with politics, with its fatal catchwords that stir up strife, yet elude definition.

Challoner blessed Edyth for pinning her new friend to Town topics. But there was old Copeland, a rank pessimist, already rumbling away about the latest outcrop of riots in the Punjab, that had only been checked by the presence of a British Deputy Commissioner. Called upon to act — when the Indian city authorities were at their wits’ end — his prompt and vigorous measures had cleared the air.

“Publicly thanked — and all that,” Copeland concluded his tale. “But, now the danger’s past, we shall have our friends at Delhi demanding an enquiry and the Extremist Press serving him up on toast, with their special brand of *sauce tartare!*”

“What surprises me,” remarked the new lady doctor, who had listened with interest, “is that any British official can *still* be induced to act vigorously — after our treatment of General Dyer.”

Goldring’s monocle flashed round on her. “What surprises

me," he countered, "at this stage of India's political development is that British officials should still be in the saddle. One gathers that the bulk of educated Indians are clamouring to be rid of them. And it's their country, after all. It strikes me we're in a false position here. We've abdicated in spirit. Why not admit it — and abdicate in fact?"

Challoner's eyes were on Edyth's face, while her neighbour thus delivered himself to a tableful of Anglo-Indian men and women. Her eyes were on Goldring; alight with intelligent interest. And a sudden dread that she might be inspired to air her Little-England views — there before them all — spurred him to take up the challenge tacitly flung down.

"Easy talking, Mr. Goldring," he said, with his incisive quietness. "But not quite so simple as it sounds. You yourself are out here, I understand, in connection with Bolshevik propaganda among our illiterate peasants? And you advocate wholesale retreat — leaving the coast clear for those wide-awake theorists and our good friend Gandhi?"

"Well, it's *their* country. That's my argument."

"Which of theirs — should you say?" Challoner enquired innocently.

Goldring looked a little blank; and Edyth's eyes shifted uneasily to her husband's face. But her 'Daniel-come-to-judgment' had his wits about him.

"I suppose," he said, "that's for them to settle among themselves."

"Without our superfluous assistance — eh?" Challoner glanced at Rayne, who was thoroughly enjoying these unorthodox dinner-table amenities. "I'm afraid the Extremists have been getting at you, Mr. Goldring. Well — if it ever comes to that, I suggest the discarded body of Indian Civilians should advocate the appointment of a Super-Commission — say fifty M.P.'s, and others, who have blessed the great experiment — to spend six months out here and record their first-hand impressions of *Swarajya* in being. Honestly done, it would be a human document of surpassing interest."

He launched his impromptu fantasy with a baffling gravity that

left Goldring obviously uncertain whether this dry-mannered Civilian Colonel was or was not pulling his intellectual leg.

Rayne — chuckling inwardly — felt constrained to take pity on his guest.

“No fear, Goldring,” he said kindly. “Colonel Challoner’s inspired proposal wouldn’t get a look in at Westminster. And things aren’t moving that way yet. The position’s too complicated for a clean cut.”

“You’re not afraid of non-coöperation, sir?”

Challoner struck in again. “Non-coöperation’s a damp squib.”

“Gandhi’s not, though.” Goldring countered promptly. “The way he sways and stirs these people is little short of a miracle.”

“Oh, quite. A cararact of words, plus that mysterious element, ‘soul force,’ can move mountains in this country. He knows all about that.”

“You’ve met him, sir? You’ve heard him speak?”

“No. I’ve never had the honour. So best, perhaps. It’s just on the cards — he might convert me, which would be a trifle awkward, in my position.”

At that, Goldring’s eyeglass nearly dropped out — and Challoner dared not look at his wife.

“You mean — you really have a lurking sympathy with the national outlook?”

“My dear sir, if you can produce a credible sample of it, you’ll find me a well of sympathy undefiled! I only mean I’m with Gandhi — up to a point — in his recoil from our industrial and political blessings in disguise. I share his respect for the genius of the East.” He leaned forward, shyness dispelled by the one theme that could stir him to self-expression. He was scarcely aware that half the table was listening to the two men, who were simply intent on each other. “Broadly speaking, India’s an agricultural, martial, and intellectual country. Those are her strong suits. And Gandhi knows it. Under cover of his very sophisticated sanctity, he’s roping in all the best fighting stuff in the country. Not so long ago the Sikhs and Mahomedans were our staunchest friends out here. Now — look at the Punjab — seething! While we fellows squander our time and energy speeding

up the total abolition of ourselves and our kind. A tall order — even for a race of incurable idealists.”

“Oh, if you put it *that* way . . . But — taking a wider view . . . I suppose it’s the finest self-denying ordinance any nation has ever conceived.”

“M . . . in theory. In practice your high theoretical idea is almost as devastating as your genuine man of peace! Call me canting Imperialist if you like — but, as I see it, we’ve no earthly right to indulge in an orgy of self-denial at the expense of millions here who need us — white and brown. We’ve made deplorable mistakes. But we’ve done our level best — up to our lights. We’re still only at the beginning of the biggest task on earth. And if we’re going to let ourselves be squeezed out of the country by a handful of lawyer intellectuals . . .”

His sharp, involuntary gesture was more moving than a score of words. Knife handles rapped. There were murmurs of “Hear, hear!”

Challoner — mutely acknowledging them — found himself looking straight into Edyth’s eyes; realised, with a jerk, how completely he had let himself go, and added, in his drier vein: “Meantime, we’re still in being. And the interesting experiment goes on.”

“Oh, yes — good as a play,” muttered Copeland, whose pessimism was relieved by no satiric vein. “Specially for the Olympians — in the boxes. The tottering Raj will probably last their time: it’s we under-dogs who will reap the whirlwind. What I say is — if we’re really wanted to keep the ring for an All-India free fight, let us make a stand for workable conditions that will attract the right sort. But if they flood us out with Indians, and don’t increase our time limit, I prophesy they’ll be flooded out themselves with resignations in 1924 —”

“I’m not so sure of that.” Challoner’s measured tones cut across Copeland’s rumble of foreboding. Unfailingly, he had read the thought in Edyth’s eyes; and it was as if he answered her; as if he were saying to her — before them all — things he would not dream of saying to her alone. “I don’t seem to see the men of our Service deserting wholesale. And there’s always an off chance of

developments that it would need a very shrewd prophet to foretell. I've still a remnant of faith left in the haphazard genius of our race. We're nothing if not adaptable; and it's the adaptable who survive. A United States of India, with our Government as President, strikes me as the least Gilbertian suggestion put forward so far. But it's a Chinese puzzle that will probably solve itself while we're arguing and legislating ourselves crazy over it!"

A gust of laughter cleared the air of controversy. The general buzz of talk revived.

Challoner dared not look at Edyth again; and Lady Rayne's charming voice at his elbow claimed his attention.

"Well spoken," she said under cover of the renewed hubbub. She was small, like her husband, with a spirit far in excess of her inches.

"The credit's Goldring's." He smiled down at her. "Those fellows get such a lop-sided view of it all. But I apologise for hurling chunks of political pie at your defenceless guests."

"I enjoyed it. So did Alton — obviously. Such a refreshing change from the usual chatter. Very good for Mr. Goldring. And I like to see you roused. Your wife seemed very much impressed!"

"No — did she?"

The schoolboy simplicity of it went to Lady Rayne's heart — he seemed really doubtful; really pleased. His gaze had shifted to his wife, who was very much occupied with her neighbour, and Elsa Rayne watched him . . . wondering.

Those two set her wondering, always. She had heard of his rather surprising friendship with Mrs. Vane. The Amiable Sham saw to that. And she felt a shade anxious about it, in view of his appointment; more than a shade anxious as to the effect on husband and wife of their over-long separation.

Deeply versed as she was in the peculiar delights and dangers of marriage in India, she knew the good and evil of those incidental separations that even the most devoted pair cannot altogether escape. She knew, from experience, how the pang of parting, the joy of reunion — the very dangers and discomforts of Indian conditions — keep the bloom of romance on a real marriage far longer than the incessant propinquity of most married lives, at

Home. She knew also the cruel strain of a heart pulled two ways, when the children are gone; the temptation to shirk India because of them; and the fatality of it — if one cared. She had seen the tragedy, for the man; the ultimate wreck of the ship.

She loved Colonel Challoner as her husband loved him. She had not felt quite sure of the effect on his wife of his very plain speaking; but the effect on him of her last remark made her feel glad she had spoken. Even a thought tilted the right way may have its vital value when things are at strain between man and wife. She would be very nice to Mrs. Challoner — afterwards. Though her sympathies and affection were with him, she had the larger wisdom of the heart that never sits in judgment . . .

When the ladies rose, she looked up at her tall partner. "Are you going for him again — when we're safe out of the way?"

"Depends on how he behaves! And there's Alton to keep me in order."

She shook her head. "He wouldn't, if he could. And he couldn't — if he would!"

"His wife can, though," he told her with a look, as she turned to follow the others.

Sure as fate Goldring asked for it again — and got it, duly diluted because of Lady Rayne. As a rule Challoner preferred hearing the other side to parading his own views. But a young man on an influential Home paper was worth tackling in a friendly spirit — while the officers chaffed, and Copeland grouched genially, and Tarrant told broad stories that made the old pessimist chuckle in spite of his grievances.

At ease, in the company of his fellows, Challoner forgot all about his missing shirt-front: but when 'the ladies' threatened again, self-consciousness revived. And there would be Edyth . . .

The temptation to bolt was irresistible. As the men moved away, talking, he turned to his old friend.

"Let me off the ladies, Alton. I've done what I can for your special."

"He'll retaliate by roasting you in an article. Home Rule Press, for preference."

"He's welcome. Just explain — will you — to my wife? Say I'll send the car."

"You leave it to me." Sir Alton winked knowingly. "I've made an impression to-night! Done you a good turn —"

Challoner gave him a quick look. "What's that — ? If you have been telling tales . . . ?"

"Not the tail of a mouse, I swear it! You go home and put your head in a bag!"

"A volume on Kashmir, more likely! Good-night, old man." He put a hand on his friend's shoulder. "A thousand apologies. I think — your wife's forgiven me."

"Elsa — ? She'd forgive you anything."

It was the second time he had been told so that night — and he knew it was true. The knowledge cheered him on his homeward walk through the keen night air. It touched the strain of simplicity in him that runs through all great character. Incidentally, he caught himself wishing it could be said of Edyth with equal truth.

What the devil had Alton been romancing about to try and smooth her down? He knew his friend well enough to guess the motive — if he could guess no more.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*I must not think of thee; and tired yet strong
I shun the thought that lurks in all delight —
I must stop short of thee the whole day long.*

ALICE MEYNELL

THE brisk walk and the frosty air set his brain tingling. An hour with his books in the study would be more profitable than coining talk in mixed company and watching Edyth make up to that remarkably self-assured young man. He had rarely known a twinge of jealousy where she was concerned.

The sight of it had partly precipitated his volcanic eruption. Alone with her, he instinctively avoided discussion of India or Indian affairs. Her attitude grated on him. His own feeling was too strong. He could not trust himself to keep cool; and in his sincere desire to avoid friction, God knew what opportunities he had missed of making things clearer to her, all round. But when Goldring began it, and her eyes approved him, the impulse to speak out had been sudden and overwhelming. And, by Jove, he had spoken out! The others must have thought he had taken leave of himself . . .

On his way to the study he passed Eve's bedroom door. It was ill-fitting, like most Indian doors; and all round it ran a streak of light. The little villain must be reading in bed! Flat disobedience. He ought to go in and scold her. But his sympathies were with the sin and his heart a captive to the sinner.

Very quietly he opened the door; so as not to frighten her. She was reading, of course, in her favourite attitude; flat on her front, elbows planted on the pillow, chin in her hands, her eyes devouring the open page.

As he closed the door, she started, clapped a hand onto her book and jerked her head round — clearly in a fright. Her frank relief told him a good deal more than she guessed.

“Daddy, you terrified me!”

"You were afraid — it was Mother?"

"Yes."

"Serve you right if it had been! A bad conscience is always jumpy. You know it's against orders. What do you mean by it, eh?"

His dutiful attempt at a scolding 'cut no ice' at all. Others might find him austere at times; his small daughter never.

"I didn't mean — only a little bit. But it's so scrumptious. You know —"

"I know it's a bad habit — for little girls. And orders is orders. D'*you* know it's after half-past ten? What would Mummy say?"

Her *moue* of distaste stirred an impermissible flicker of sympathy.

"Mummy's always saying."

"That means . . . you are always doing. Think of your luck, little woman, being out here instead of at school; and don't go taking advantage of it. If you really get out of hand, you know, we shall have to ship you and Miss Minton back Home!"

He said it half in joke, just a touch of the curb to save her from herself; and was not at all prepared for the effect of his words.

"Daddy, don't — oh, don't!" She caught at his arm and made him sit on the bed beside her; clinging to him with a vehemence that troubled him even while it moved him to the depths. "Say you didn't mean it. I won't be a bad girl. And I won't — I *won't* be sent away from India — and you."

Very tenderly he gathered her to him. Such a volcanic slip of a thing, in her thin gown.

"I won't let you go, my darling — if I can help it," he said; and kissed the satin-smooth hollow of her temple.

They were silent a moment, both unspeakably content. Then: "Listen, Eve," he said, his fingers straying in her hair. "You're old enough to know it's not reading in bed that really matters. It's disobeying Mother."

"I do know. And I do try, Daddy. But it's always the nicest things."

He sighed. Her childish remark struck home.

"Yes. It's always the nicest things — even for grown-ups." And he kissed her again. She herself was one of the nicest things that had mercifully not been denied him. "What is it this time?"

"Kipling. It's called the 'Bridge-Builders.'"

"Good Lord! What d'you make of it?"

"I don't know." She peeped shyly up at him, rubbing her cheek against his sleeve. "It's just India. It's tremenjus! The flood was sweeping everything away —" She caught her breath. "Have you read it?"

"Rather. But you mustn't browse on my Kipling shelf without leave. He's a great man. And great men don't always write for little girls."

"But I may read these ones?"

"Yes — if you can make anything of them."

"I don't care if I can or can't. I love them."

"So do I. We'll read some of 'em together. Now, you buck up and go to sleep, young woman. Or there'll be telltale saucers round your eyes!"

He settled her down, tucked her in, and laid Kipling on her bedside table. "Shall I take him away — or trust you not to turn a page?"

"Trust me," she pleaded; "you truly can."

"I know that," he said, with his twinkle.

She flung out her hand and caught at him. "Daddy, I do love you so! You *do* understand!"

His fingers closed firmly on hers. "I try to."

"Can people always — if they try to?"

"M — I wonder . . ." He looked down at her with his funny smile. "It's always worth trying — on the chance. Put that in your pipe and smoke it."

Then he tucked her hand under the sheet again, and left her — feeling cheered and exalted in spirit by that brief contact with reality in its loveliest form, the mind and heart of a child.

It was blessedly peaceful alone by the study fire, in his deep armchair, the logs whispering as they fell in, Larry's nose and one possessive paw laid across his foot, his pipe drawing to perfection, a fat volume on Kashmir at his elbow.

It remained at his elbow — unopened. He took out of his letter-case an envelope with the Srinagar postmark.

She and Eve would be good friends, he thought, his mind still running on the child. She would capture Eve with her birds and her music; understand the wild strain in her — of his own giving — that Edyth was so conscientiously clipping and cramping into the conventional mould of a well-brought-up girl. For himself, he dared not dwell on the too keen pleasure it would be to see and talk to her and hear her violin again.

He had been obliged to read her letter hurriedly this morning; and it had haunted his mind all day. Its contents had been partly responsible for his double event in the way of absent-mindedness. Thorne was distractingly to the fore. A mercy when his duty took him off to Leh. But the chill thought intruded — he might persuade her to go, too. She was keen on the trip . . .

There flashed a mad, momentary dream of repeating that wonderful journey — in her company . . .

He dismissed it summarily — with a curse at himself and Fate: drew out her letter and re-read it at leisure . . .

She had been composing, she told him, to beguile the two worst months in Kashmir. It was an ambitious attempt. He should hear more of that, later on. For the present, he only heard of dances and rides with Captain Thorne; of a wonderful break in the weather when she had gone out after stag, with Captain Thorne — and others. No doubt her next letter would inform him she had accepted Captain Thorne. His teeth clenched viciously on the stem of his pipe. It was an aged and beloved pipe; and fear of breaking it brought him to his senses. Of course, she ought to marry — the sooner the better. He rubbed it in by way of spiritual castigation for the fury of jealousy that possessed him. And Thorne was sound all through — even if he could hardly gauge to the full her heights and depths, her infinite variety.

How she would have enjoyed his slip that evening! And there was Edyth, obviously making a whole mountain range out of his molehill.

What the devil had possessed him in those days? — he some-

times wondered. That he, with his secret craving to get away from the beaten track, should have been beguiled (so he saw it now) into marrying a wife who was the beaten track incarnate . . .

Yet, for all her limitations, Edyth had her depths. She could be roused — on occasion. One could not call her bad; yet one could not call her good — in the active, vital sense. If you tried to sum her up, it was mainly a string of negatives. A puzzling creature: sometimes he doubted if he knew her, even now. At times she annoyed him beyond measure; at others, he felt tenderly, though not passionately, drawn to her. A thoroughly good wife she might have been . . . for a different sort of man; and possibly he might have been a less difficult husband to — well, a different sort of woman. It was just that — in some way — they seemed to stultify one another. And now — !

Sounds of the car outside roused him from his reverie.

He basely hoped she would go straight to her room. No luck! He heard her pause by the door, and dragged himself out of his chair. He was on his feet when she entered; his back to the fire, braced for reproaches, long overdue.

“You’re home early,” he remarked, aware that she looked more animated than usual, and that her silver-grey cloak was very becoming. “I thought the new young man would keep you talking till all hours!”

“Oh, he’s very interesting, very clever,” she agreed. “He’s coming to tea to-morrow. But *you* can’t talk — bolting like that. And only arriving when dinner was half over! What’s the matter with you, Ian? You’ve been queer all day.”

For a wonder there was no grievance in her tone. She seemed quite concerned. Her best friend could not call her observant. But he had simply flung it in her face.

“Myself’s the matter with me, I suppose,” he said, with his crooked smile. “It’s a complaint we all suffer from at times. And unluckily it’s incurable. Spare me a full-dress wiggling, Edyth. It was rotten of me — letting you down. The dog-cart and all — I’m awfully sorry. I can’t say more. I made my peace with the Raynes.”

"Yes. She told me. They were both *so* kind." Again he noticed a friendlier animation in her smile. "They might have been badly annoyed. Very lucky for *you*, Sir Alton thinks so highly of you. I didn't realise — you had such a reputation."

"Oh, I've a devil of a reputation!"

His faintly caustic tone annoyed her. "That's the way you always turn things off. Just when I'm feeling pleased."

"My dear, I'm delighted to hear it. What was Rayne yarning about to chirk you up so?"

"He wasn't yarning. He said very nice things. Nicer than you deserved! And he seemed quite pleased, the way you held forth to the whole table. *I* thought — the whiskey must have gone to your head —"

He jerked up his chin and laughed. That was Edyth all over! "Something else went to my head," he said, with a look. "And I had to let off steam. Hope it gave Goldring to think a bit." Manlike, he kept his more personal hope to himself.

She was silent a moment. Then it came out.

"Why do you never talk to me — like that?"

"You wouldn't listen — if I did."

"Well, I listened to-night."

"You couldn't help yourself. And you disagreed wholesale — eh?"

"N-no. I don't know. Some things . . . I hadn't thought of — that way."

So surprising a confession spurred him to a tentative appeal.

"Well, dear, if you would occasionally try and think of 'em that way, matters might be easier for us both. You see — I intend to stick it out."

"Yes — I see." She did not, in fact, see many inches beyond her own neatly chiselled nose; but her comfortable convictions had been disturbed by the breeze of his eloquence; and she was seeing the man himself in a new light.

"It won't be so bad — in Kashmir. And, of course . . . if you're really going to get on —"

"That's it — is it?" he remarked in a changed tone.

"Well, it does make a difference — doesn't it?"

"Oh — it does!"

Her brows twitched. "Now you're being horrid again. And I'm sleepy." She yawned discreetly. "Come to bed, like a sensible man. No more work to-night. If you *will* sit up to all hours, of course you get headaches and overlook important engagements!"

"I haven't done any work," he said honestly. "I'm not in the mood."

"Then come along, dear old boy. Don't sit brooding over the fire."

There was persuasion in her smile, in the touch of her hand on his arm. Decidedly she looked more alive this evening. And it was decent of her not to make a fuss. He had braced himself for reproaches; and here she was half making love to him — whatever the motive . . .

Compunction stirred in him. With an odd, abrupt movement, he pulled her to him and kissed her lips.

But, even in the act, he knew that the honours of the evening were with Alton Rayne.

CHAPTER NINE

*I cannot be —
Mine own, not anything to any, if
I be not thine.*

SHAKESPEARE

MRS. CHAMIER'S back verandah looked out over one of the most flourishing gardens in Peshawur. Next to managing her fellows, she most keenly enjoyed training her plants and shrubs in the way they should go; and she was inordinately proud of the result.

In the verandah were rugs and chairs and small tables; and, on the afternoon following the Raynes' party, Chris lay alone in a deep cane chair, reading a long letter from Vanessa, while she waited for Kaye.

She saw less of him nowadays. Something, or someone, had got in the way. But last night he had begged leave to call for her and drive her to see the polo 'finals' — the event of the week. She had really no business to let him drive her around like that, since obviously nothing would come of it. But when he seemed keen, there was no resisting him. And who cared — one way or the other? This afternoon all her natural sparkle seemed gone from her.

She had been up and out early, for a run with the Peshawur Valley Hounds; a fine cross-country scamper, with more than a spice of danger to it. Riding hell-for-leather, the keen morning air in her face, the stirring music of hoofs all round her, she could outpace her troubled heart. For that one hour it seemed almost good enough simply to be alive and young and instinct with health and vigour.

But when you came home, and tiredness invaded you — it was another story. There was Aunt Amabel everlastingly talking like a gramophone; and kind old Uncle Ned everlastingly telling stories you'd heard twenty times before; and Mrs. Somebody's tennis day; and Major Harrap hovering on the verge, with dollars in his eye, plainer than print.

Then it came creeping over you — a sort of devil's whisper — that you wouldn't always be young and full of vigour; that, even now, there were times when you felt like a squirrel in a cage: always the same old treadmill round of amusements — 'round and round and round and round; and round and round again.' Year after year! Turned you dizzy even to think of it.

The cold weather — that she had secretly counted on — was dwindling fast. February gone: March a few days old — India's turn of the year, with its whispered threat for the bond, its promise of the hills in their beauty for the free.

To Chris it whispered of a wrench that might be final; a definite resolve to go right away and feed her starved heart on the husks of hill-station amenities. There were bad moments when her gallant spirit quailed at the prospect; there were pluckier moments when it arraigned her for a moral coward — hanging on, hoping, without shame or pride.

Why not prove her own independence — try and get away now? But where to — ?

Her mind reverted with relief to Vanessa's letter. The spell of her personality was potent — near or far; and it was a long, intimate letter; Vanessa at her best. But, more than usual, you could feel her loneliness lying, like a mud flat, under her sparkle of talk about books and music and other men. How if they two went shares in their loneliness? Would it seem not quite such a dismal affair? With Vanessa, you could never feel a squirrel in a cage. She had the magic gift of personality that seemed to make all things new. But . . . would she care . . . ?

Invaded by one of her impulses, Chris left it to simmer, while her eye ran over Vanessa's final page.

I want another letter, Chris [she wrote], and I want it rather badly. So hurry up.

I've been hard at it — composing for violin and piano: something bigger than the fantasies and minor pieces that I've achieved so far. Something in the nature of a tone-poem — if you know what that is! And I'm calling it "Gangabal." You know what *that* is, anyway! Though your Gangabal is one thing — and mine's another. Yours is safely tucked away in your heart — as it should be. But mine

wouldn't stay there, because God and my father made me a sort of an artist — which it's a most three-cornered, uncomfortable thing to be; but which I wouldn't *not* be for all the cushions in Christendom! So I've told out *my* Gangabal in music — and he that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

If I seem to be writing essence of drivel, forgive me. It's only reaction. I've been strung up to concert pitch these many weeks — and I'm paying the penalty.

So write to me soon. Your best brand. And don't go trimming and clipping the thoughts of your heart for fear I think you sentimental. Why should we be ashamed of the way God made us? I know — and you know — that wrongly debased word is the essence of almost everything that makes life worth having —

Oh, Lord, I'm maundering again! I'm at a loose end and a low ebb with my lovely occupation gone.

So write — write, and send me the news I am waiting for.

Your VANESSA

P.S. Don't speak of my Gangabal outburst to Colonel Challoner. I'm rather shy of it still, and it's not nearly complete. Only the 'first fine careless rapture.' I'll hammer it out when I'm cooler towards it. And you shall all hear it later on if I get Thea Leigh for the piano part. I think she'll come up this summer. And don't you dare do otherwise! By order.

V. V.

Before she finished, she had heard Aunt Amabel enter the verandah, but had wickedly refrained from looking up — Aunt Amabel and Vanessa clashed like magenta and scarlet.

Of course, it was useless. She would interrupt unflinching, even if you were at your prayers. She unflinchingly did.

"Oh, *there* you are, Chris! As quiet as a mouse."

Chris looked up blandly. "Well, what else would I be? Singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs? I was reading."

Deliberately she folded up her letter; Mrs. Chamier watching her, with the furtive intentness of the curiously minded.

"Very absorbed you were. Who's your letter from?"

Chris knew *that* was coming as surely as you know a clock will strike when the whirring begins. Aunt Amabel couldn't set eyes

on a letter without asking who it was from. Sometimes it roused the devil in Chris.

"It's — a proposal," she said gravely, "from a multi-millionaire in little old New York."

Aunt Amabel opened her mouth to gasp — then shut it with a click of false teeth. Chris was a poor liar. Her eyes betrayed her.

"Really, Chris! I don't see anything funny in telling me fibs when I ask a perfectly natural question."

She was hurt as well as angry; and Chris repented on the spot. "Sorry, Aunt Bel. Don't get peeved. It's from Vanessa."

"So I thought. I wish you weren't so intimate. *She* wouldn't be bothered to keep up with a girl of your age if she didn't want to make use of you."

"She's very welcome." Chris jerked up her small square chin. It was a danger signal; but Mrs. Chamier's undeviating mind was intent on Mrs. Vane.

"She must find Srinagar pretty dull in the winter. It's a wonder she isn't down here."

"I jolly well wish she was!" Chris sighed, with unguarded fervour — and the gasp came off, this time.

"My *dear* child! I sometimes think you're an out-and-out fool."

"And I sometimes know I am," Chris answered, unruffled, with an eye on her bracelet watch. "Kaye's a bit late. You go on. Don't keep Mrs. Challoner waiting. I'm quite a safe fool!"

"Captain Lenox oughtn't to keep *you* waiting. These modern young men are so casual. And you girls are just as bad. There was such a nice bit I copied out once, from Thackeray — or Dickens (I always mix them up). Something about 'men serve women kneeling, when they get up, they go away.' It would be such a good thing if present-day young men had to learn that by heart."

"Quite enough to *make* them get up and go away," Chris retorted, spluttering with laughter. "*We* don't want them crawling about on their knees, thanks very much."

Always these digs at the younger generation. She was sick of them. The jerk of her head made her put up her hands, to re-

settle her hat upon her short hair, and the movement shifted Mrs. Chamier's vagrant attention to a *monál* head and crest that adorned one side of it.

"A very becoming hat you've got on," she remarked, with her wonted irrelevance; "such a handsome plume."

Chris raised her brows. "Have you only just noticed it? I put it in ages ago."

"Who did you get it from? Did you have the luck to shoot a *monál* yourself?"

"No. Kaye did — when we went for our little trip up the Sind Valley."

Mrs. Chamier's stare informed Chris she had 'crashed' badly; Aunt Bel had never been told! These catechisms knocked her silly.

"You mean to say you and Captain Lenox went off alone — after all I said at Gulmarg?"

"Well, what harm?" She had neatly let herself in; but she would not condescend to prevaricate about it. "Going from Gulmarg would have been a shade conspicuous."

"So you did it behind my back? How *long* were you away together . . . if one may ask?"

Chris leisurely reckoned the precise fraction of time that she and Kaye had been removed from grace.

"About thirty-six hours," she said at last; "perhaps thirty-four — to be exact."

Mrs. Chamier, picturing a week, felt foolish, which only increased her wrath.

"Oh. You were away for a *night*?"

"I'm afraid we were!" she admitted serenely. "We slept in the open — in sight of one another. And we were properly policed all day by Colonel Challoner's pet *shikari*. So now you know!"

"And how do *you* know . . . it hasn't leaked out? That sort of thing always does. And the way you have been going on here — you know what I mean. The sooner you bring Captain Lenox to book, and announce your engagement, the better."

"Bring him to book!" Chris felt her cheeks growing uncom-

fortably warm. "We're very good friends, Kaye and I; but, you can take it from me, Peshawur won't be getting any romantic announcements from *us*."

"Then your Uncle must see Captain Lenox himself. He's no catch for a girl with your means. But you've let yourself in — most imprudently. And, as a man of honour, he must see that he's *got* to marry you — the way matters stand."

At that Chris flung up her head and laughed outright.

"Poor old Kaye! That's the richest thing I've ever heard. Positively antediluvian."

"I don't understand you." Mrs. Chamier drew herself up in high dudgeon. Red blotches showed on her cheeks. "This is a very serious matter; and I'm sure you're fond of Captain Lenox. Yet I get nothing out of you but impertinence and flippancy. It's not like you. It's the fruits of getting intimate with a fast, unprincipled woman like Mrs. Vane."

"You can leave Vanessa out of it," Chris cut in peremptorily.

"Can I, indeed? I wish *you* would. She fooled you — and Captain Lenox. *Then* it's Colonel Challoner. And, when it suits her book, she throws Captain Lenox at your head —"

"It's not — she didn't . . ." Chris was on her feet, flushed and defiant; a spark of temper in her red-brown eyes. "You're utterly unfair . . . distorting everything —"

"I'm not. She's a clever, designing woman. It's you that have lost your head over her. She oughtn't to have allowed it. But all *she* wanted was a couple of days alone with Colonel Challoner —"

"Oh, be quiet! If you start abusing Vanessa, I'll decamp outright."

For an instant Mrs. Chamier felt thoroughly alarmed. Chris was too good a financial asset to let slip because she was crazed over Mrs. Vane.

"My dear girl, don't talk melodramatics," she urged more placably; "it would be a scandal. And you've nowhere to go —"

"I have. I'd go straight to Vanessa."

"Kashmir — in March? All that way — alone? And half the road blocked? I never heard such nonsense! But, of course,

I see how it is." Her temper flared afresh — "Mrs. *Vane's* been putting you up to it. Very convenient for *her*, going shares —"

"Vanessa! That's the limit," Chris blazed, in white-hot fury. "She's never said a word. I don't even know if she wants me. After *that*, nothing would induce me to stop — Oh, Lord, here's Kaye —"

The bearer announced, "Lenox Sahib *argya.*"

"*Salaam dō,*" said Chris, with regal unconcern.

Mrs. Chamier's wrath dissolved in dismay.

"You're so hot-tempered, child. Think it over," she suggested, retreating down the verandah.

Chris shook her head. She was still uncomfortably perturbed — cheeks very pink, eyes very bright — when Kaye appeared, tall and smiling and repentant. And suddenly her heart sank — realising what she had done. She had crossed her Rubicon: no going back on it now.

"I'm awfully sorry, Chris," he began — and stopped short. "What's up? Are you really annoyed?"

The flagrant understatement waked her sense of humour.

"Annoyed! I'm an erupted volcano! I've had such a scene with Aunt *Unamiable* as never was —"

"But why — what —?"

"Oh — Vanessa —" She flung out the word in a kind of desperation. "She's a mean beast about Vanessa — always. I can't stand it. I never could. So I mislaid my temper. I up and said I'd go — and I'm going."

"Going — where?"

"Kashmir, of course," she said, without looking at him.

"But you can't — all alone —"

She sighed. Her impulse began to look less alluring. "I'll fix it up somehow. I'll persuade Uncle Ned or Colonel Challoner to lend me a good man for escort. I've got the will. I'll find the way."

Suddenly her valour wilted. She sank into her chair again and lay there looking out into the green garden — all gay and fragrant with March roses — wishing to goodness *he* would erupt; tell her she must not go; take her in his arms . . .

And he stood there looking down at her realising that Peshawur would be a blank without her. The tangle of their indeterminate relation distracted him; but he had not forgotten her indictment at Sonamarg: "As I see it, you haven't the right." Had he any better right now? The other feeling — though mellowed and quieter — was still there; and her abrupt resolve to leave Peshawur seemed in itself to indicate the futility of trying to elucidate his complicated state of heart and mind.

To both, the brief silence seemed interminable. It brought tears to the girl's eyes, but she blinked them away, and said casually: "It's getting late. You scoot along to the polo, Kaye. Somehow — after Aunt Amiable — I feel off it."

"Beast of a woman! Don't let her see she's downed you. And you look ripping in that get-up — my feathers and all."

She shook her head. Her spirits had sunk to zero; and she could not explain.

"I like your compliment. But truthfully — I'm not in the mood."

"Well, come for a drive. I don't care a damn about the polo."

She screwed up her eyes at him in the way he loved.

"If that isn't a barefaced lie . . . !"

"It's the barefaced truth, at this moment."

To that surprising declaration she had no answer. And after a brief hesitation he went on: "Chris, *why* do you go rushing off like this?"

"Oh — because I'm a silly fool with a temper. And I generally do things in rushes. Besides — it's just as well —"

"For you — I dare say. Not so jolly for me . . . We've had such ripping times together."

She nodded, not venturing to look at him. "You'll soon buck up and find lots of nice girls to play round with."

"Will I, indeed? I'm not *that* sort — whatever you may think."

The annoyance in his tone was proof of sincerity. Her cheeks grew warmer under it. How could he mind so much? How could he be so kind and dear — and yet not care?

"I didn't mean it for an insult," she said meekly; "I meant it

— for consolation. I've — loved it, Kaye. But there's a limit to what I can stand from Aunt Amiable. And I *think* — Vanessa's a bit lonely up there."

He stared out into the compound, positively annoyed with himself at the disturbance wrought in him by her mere name.

"Have you heard — lately?"

"Yes — this morning." She knew she had been a coward, keeping off the subject. Should she offer him her letter — and watch the effect? She felt in a mood for reckless doings this afternoon.

"Would you like — to read it?" she asked in a small voice.

At that unexpected offer, he turned, a shade too eagerly.

"But she mightn't — it's written to you —"

"No secrets in it — she wouldn't mind."

"It's very decent of you . . ."

He felt steadier now. It was a privilege beyond his deserts. It was also an ordeal of the first magnitude reading that letter — which brought her so vividly before him — with Chris looking on. He could only hope his queer clash of sensations didn't show through.

If they did, she gave no sign.

"Thanks very much," he said, handing it back to her. "She *can* write. It's rotten luck . . . losing you. But *she'll* be glad to have you."

Chris sighed. "I hope so. And the Challoners'll be up soon, too. D'you think she'll be friends with Mrs. Challoner?"

"No. How *could* she?" The words were out before he realised.

"Kaye!" — Her tone told him she understood — "I never thought — *you* knew."

"I saw — going up to Gangabal."

And Chris saw, suddenly, that lone vision of him, sitting on a boulder, his head between his hands.

But she said nothing; and he stood there tongue-tied; more and more aware of her; more and more aware that he could not let her go away like this. And yet — ?

"I suppose you'll go up to Gulmarg — you two?" he asked casually.

"I suppose so. Unless we go off climbing."

"Then I'll wangle first leave, somehow, and come up there, too — "

That startled her. "No, Kaye. Truly . . . you'd much better not."

"Why better not?" He turned, half angrily. "Where else would I go? I want to see you."

"Me?"

"Yes — why not? You don't mean . . . you're not bolting . . . from *me*?"

"Well — that *was* the idea."

Her cheeks flamed.

"*Chris!*" Instantly he dropped on one knee, to be nearer her, and seized the hand that lay on the arm of her chair. "What d'you mean . . . by that? *Why?*"

"Oh, because . . . ! You don't know what desperate things we've been slinging at each other, Aunt Amiable and I."

"About me?"

"Yes — about you."

"Well, tell me." The growing certainty that she cared more than he had ventured to hope gave an urgency to his tone. "It's not fair to go slinging desperate things about, and keeping me in the dark."

"Oh, I can't tell you."

"But you *must*. I shall keep kneeling here 'on and off for three or four days,' till you do!"

The corners of her mouth twitched. "What an awful threat!"

"You're 'side-slipping' out of it. Go ahead."

His eyes held hers. They were the very blue of glaciers. Basely she veiled her own; and with intermittent blushings and gurglings, she told him — as best she could.

"And you've *got* to marry me — so now you know! Aunt Sham's orders!" And on the words an insane terror seized her — 'Does he mean it, seriously? Have I gone too far?' The belief that he actually cared — at last — seemed almost more happiness than she could bear. "But, of course, no one dreams of obeying Aunt Sham's orders!" she flung out lightly — that he might not suppose . . .

"Well, someone's going to *this* time," he announced; and a warm wave of relief broke over her, at the decision in his tone. "She's jolly well right — for once in her life! Chris — you *know* I love you. And all this time you've been letting me believe it was no go. If you care . . . only a little bit . . ."

Her indrawn breath and swiftly mantling colour confessed the depths of her caring: and his fingers tightened on hers.

"Chris!" he cried, still half incredulous. "If — if that's how you feel about it, why the dickens did you go turning me down in advance?"

"Oh, *that* —" Her laugh had a little catch in it. "It was pure emergency tactics. And weren't you just grateful to me, too?"

"And — you didn't mean it?" he pressed her, ignoring that last.

With unwavering courage she looked him straight in the eyes.

"I did mean it — every word. And I mean it still — *unless* —?"

"Chris — don't be too hard on a fellow."

"Kaye, my dear, I don't want to be. But I know my Vanessa. I know the hold she gets. I can fight Aunt Sham about her like a tiger-cat. But, when it comes to you, I'm a green-eyed monster of jealousy. And that's a nice maidenly confession! But it's true; and I'll have nothing but the truth between you and me —"

For answer he kissed the back of her hand; and she shyly fingered his thick dark hair.

"You said . . . then, you wouldn't have me, even if I went on my knees about it. Well, you've brought me to my knees about it! — Chris — *are* you having me, in spite of the wobbling fool I've been?"

His urgency and the fervour of his kiss almost dissolved her resolution; almost — not quite.

"I hope I am — some day," she said softly. "But not till I've *seen* you see Vanessa again. And it won't be a mite of use acting indifference. I'll know — sure as fate."

He sighed, dreading it, while admitting it was only fair.

"That's a horrid long time to wait."

"If it's worth anything . . . it's worth waiting for."

"But must you go rushing off — *now*? Chris — you dear darling —"

He had captured both her hands. He was leaning nearer. But by a miracle she hung on to her resolve.

"That's the nicest thing I've ever heard in my life," she confessed, her new-found happiness bubbling up and welling over, beautiful to see. "We'll leave it at that — for the time being. And we'll go for our drive, like sensible people — which we aren't, either of us — thanks be! Come along."

She made a move to free her hands, but he pulled her out of the chair, still holding them; pulled her, very nearly, into his arms. But she righted herself — just in time.

"Not yet, Kaye," she commanded, softly resolute, freeing her hands.

"Not — this once?" he pleaded.

She shook her head. There were tears in her eyes. "It was mad risky, *refusing* you in advance. I'm not taking any other risks — in advance! Come and drive me round. And then — we'll look in at the polo . . ."

She had moved a step away from him, lest temptation overwhelm her. He said nothing; never even moved. His silence tugged at her more irresistibly than any word of appeal. And her own heart tugged harder still. He could not want that one kiss more than she did — she, who had waited and ached . . .

Impulsively, she turned back, and went quite close to him. Without looking up at him, she leaned her cheek against his sleeve.

Instantly his arms were round her; his lips giving her the full assurance she craved . . .

He believed himself conqueror; but her divine inconsistency had its limits. In spite of him, she half disengaged herself.

"And that's *all*," she told him. The tears were on her cheeks now. "No more — and not a word to *no* one — except the Colonel . . . till Gulmarg."

"*Chris!*" he reproached her, frankly dismayed.

"I can't help it," she sighed. "It's me. And I mean it — this time."

He saw that she did; and he submitted, with a good grace. Though delay tantalised him, there was wisdom in her hard refusal. He knew it and loved her the more.

CHAPTER TEN

Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all.

SHAKESPEARE

EDYTH and Miss Minton were in serious conclave; Eve, deep in a book, listening with all her ears.

Miss Minton had lost a little pearl brooch, to which she attached a sentimental value. The ayah had hunted everywhere. It couldn't have dropped. It had a special fastening. And she had it last in her own room. The inference was obvious — theft.

Edyth had no skill in sympathetic condolence. But she did what she could, with the sole result that gathering tears spilled over; and Eve, springing out of her abstraction, flung her arms round 'Sminny's neck, though she disliked the dampness of her tears.

"It's a horrid shame. I swear it's Moti. She's an oilsome beast."

"Eve, be quiet!" her mother commanded in a guarded undertone. "You never know where they may be slinking about. It's *not* Moti. But the worry of it is — we can't let this sort of thing go on."

It had been going on, in a small way, for some little time. That was the worry of it for Edyth. The vanished brooch was all that mattered to 'Sminny, who was swallowing her tears and dabbing Eve's cheek with wet kisses.

"Come and have one more hunt," the child consoled her; and they departed, affectionately linked, to Edyth's relief.

In her own mind, there was no doubt as to the real culprit — Faizullah. He had never forgiven her about Rahāt Ali. He was always respectful, of course. But he hated her — she was sure of it — and did everything he dared, on the sly, to pay her out.

Things vanished mysteriously — little things here and there. The kerosene canister was chronically empty. The way of the *dhobi* with her *jharrons* was becoming a scandal. If she attempted enquiry, she was met with blank surprise, with disarming airs of

injured innocence, as if it were criminal to suppose they knew anything of other uses for *jharrons* and kerosene beyond wiping the Sahib's dishes and filling his lamps. Native servants were all like that, more or less; but it had been noticeably more since Rahāt Ali left. Clear proof that Faizullah must be at the back of it; knowing perfectly well Ian wouldn't hear a word against him.

She had said nothing to Ian so far. She was not supposed to have domestic worries now; and she wanted to show him she could manage her own affairs. But this plague of persistent pilfering was beyond her. And when it came to bits of jewellery . . .

This was the second. She had lately lost an enamelled hatpin — a good one. There was nothing for it but telling Ian: opening his eyes to the sins of his precious Faizullah.

It would probably mean a battle. And things had been going more smoothly since the Raynes' dinner. She had made the most of Mr. Goldring's ten days; and Ian had not turned a hair; which was nice of him, considering . . . After all, he did know more about India than these young newspaper men. But he was so quiet about it; people didn't half realise . . . Anyhow, he had not been quiet with Mr. Goldring, who had seemed rather impressed. Her own conceit of herself, as Ian's wife, rose several degrees, in consequence. She responded, like a barometer, to the atmospheric pressure of other people's opinions. Sir Alton had begun it. With no larger intent than to speak up for his friend, he had flashed a light on the possible issues of Ian's everlasting work, that set her wondering whether she had any right to try to drag him away from it all, as she had secretly been hoping and planning to do. She could even almost admit that it was loyal of him resolving to 'stick it out'; while unashamedly she regretted her own part and lot in that desperate issue.

These inner stirrings increased her unwillingness to upset their surface harmony, which sufficed for her, if not for him: but her grudge against Faizullah spurred her to tackle Ian that evening, when Captain Eden had left and Eve and Miss Minton and hovering servants were safe out of the way.

He listened with his aggravating air of knowing all about it; and her reluctance evaporated.

"It's only been going on badly since we dismissed Rahāt Ali. And you know he hated that. He's been trying to make trouble in lots of little ways. He trades on your lenience. It's as obvious as daylight, isn't it?"

Ian's half smile was a trifle disconcerting.

"My obvious and your obvious don't quite tally," he remarked cryptically. "But that sort of thing can't be allowed to go on. I'll speak to Faizullah."

"Then you must speak decisively. Of course, he'll weave some plausible tale. And you'll believe it all, in spite of what I say. Sometimes, I think you're readier to believe him . . . than me."

"*Edyth!*"

The flash of temper in his tone pulled her up short, but she was not sorry to have roused him. She preferred his temper to his puzzling smile.

"Oh, I didn't mean it — literally. But I'm sure you'd believe almost anything sooner than dismiss him."

He took a long pull at his pipe. Her indictment came nearer the truth than he was likely to admit.

Encouraged by his silence, she leaned urgently towards him. "Ian, if you'd only assert yourself this once — and get rid of him . . . you don't know the relief it would be."

"Relief! You don't deserve a decent bearer." His temper flared again. "And you'd find me, minus Faizullah, as amiable as a bear with a sore back."

"Well, it would be better than feeling be-creeped."

"Be-creeped? What d'you mean?"

"Well, I know he hates Anthony — and because of Anthony — he hates me."

"What rot!"

"It isn't. And it's a horrid feeling — especially nowadays, when — when things happen like — Mrs. Finlay. I'm half afraid he may attack me, one day — if he gets a chance."

Challoner cursed under his breath. She had not got over that wretched fright — she never would.

"Look here, Edyth" — it was he who leaned forward now —

"this won't do. But I'm glad you spoke out. Better than bottling it up. Faizullah may help himself here and there. But you can take my word for it he'd never harm you, nor let anyone else harm you — because you're my wife. I know my man."

She sighed; only half reassured.

"Didn't the officers in the Mutiny think they knew their men?"

It was a shrewd thrust. From Edyth, exceptionally so. But he was not going to be worsted this time — and she began to see it.

"They did — more honour to them. But you've got to trust me in this matter, my dear — or we're done."

"I do trust you, Ian."

"You don't sound like it!" He put out a hand and enclosed hers. "Don't give way to the 'creeps,' Edyth, I beg of you. If I'd a shred of cause to think you two were not reasonably safe in my house — out they'd all go, neck and crop. D'you believe that?"

"Yes — of course I do," she said — and she meant it. But her conviction, as to Faizullah, and her unreasoning qualms remained.

Challoner rose to fetch an imaginary book from his study. He had said what he could. But she might start all over again. You never could tell with a woman.

Close to her chair he paused and patted her shoulder. "Cheer up, old lady," he said kindly. "Life's a dangerous game, or it wouldn't be worth a cent. But I'll keep you as safe as I can. That's my job! As for the thieving — Faizullah will hear of it. So will the others."

Next morning, before Challoner left for the Courts, Faizullah heard of it, in stern, clipped phrases that would have satisfied Edyth herself. But a glance at the man's face told him his own inference was the true one.

"It is to your dishonour as head man of the compound," he concluded, "that this should happen in my house."

"*Na-na*, Sahib," the man's hands went up in protest. "By the life of my son, no dishonour has arisen through me. It was never thus in the days of Rahāt Ali. But when strangers rule the

compound, and slink like as jackals in the lion's skin, how shall honest bearer-*lōg* maintain the Sahib's *izzat*?"¹

"Then you know where the trouble lies?"

"May the Presence have mercy, it is wiser to know too little than too much of a stranger's affairs."

But that which his lips disowned, his eyes imparted in one clear look at his Sahib as man to man.

Challoner acknowledged the look, and answered the spoken word.

"True talk. But the disgrace must be removed *ek dum*."

Faizullah stood pensive a moment. Then a bright idea flickered in his resourceful brain — *if* the Sahib could be persuaded to give leave . . . ?

"*Hazūr*, there is a way to find who is the *badmash*, without trouble or enquiry. Doubtless the Presence knows — ?"

The Presence nodded again. But his aspect was not favourable. He knew that these people had many effectual devices for spotting a criminal by so-called magic, based on the psychology of funk. It was the sort of thing that might possibly convince Edyth, and he was as much concerned to dispel her fears as to clear the compound of pilferers. Lending his countenance to that kind of thing was out of the question. But, to stretch a point, he might give Faizullah a free hand; and, if Edyth's 'treasure' were angered or alarmed into giving notice, so much the better.

To Faizullah, his brief silence seemed endless. Then he looked up from the diagrams he was absently drawing on a blank sheet of paper.

"I know your people have their ways — that are not our ways," he said, with a meaning look. "There seems no clear proof. So I give the order that you find out what you can, how you can — prize *bundobast-wallah* that you are! — and report to me to-morrow morning. I leave it to you."

"*Ach-cha*, Sahib. It will be done. But there are those who will make trouble."

"Tell them there will be worse trouble if thieving goes on."

"*Hazūr*."

¹ Prestige.

Faizullah salaamed low. He had scored a point against his enemy. And he was glad.

Inevitably there was trouble when the compound heard there had been suspicion of thieving, and that he, Faizullah, had orders to look into the matter. His dark hints of a magic-maker in the city, who could read the hearts of men, of a *tamāsha*, that evening, at which all the servant people must be present, stirred uneasy flutterings in a dozen windowless hovels, smoke-grimed and plastered with mud. Clearly the Sirdar intended to get at the truth.

Anthony — feeling secretly suspicious — blustered accordingly. The Sirdar's *tamāsha* was not his affair. Faizullah retorted, with a flicker of malice, that, if this matter could not be quietly checked, doubtless the Police would be called in.

The *dhobi*, whose conscience was not quite clear, in respect of *jharrons* and socks, put in a naïve plea for two days' immediate leave, on account of his sick mother — resuscitated for the occasion. The Sirdar assured him he should go — after to-morrow. And he retired, baffled, to try his luck with a votive offering at Mai Lakshmi's shrine.

Moti, ayah, openly advertised her scorn of the whole affair. Having twice crossed the black water, she had no opinion of bazaar magic. As for the Miss-Sahib's brooch, she had found it herself that very afternoon — fallen, most strangely, into the toe of an evening shoe!

The strangeness of that fall was apparent to Miss Minton, even in her tremulous joy at recovering her treasure. One had only to consider the positions of the table and the shoe; not to mention that she had worn her best ones last night, because Captain Eden came; though Moti laid out the ordinary pair. But Moti was indispensable; and she — far too happy to spoil the effect — said no word.

So Moti held her well-oiled head several inches higher — daring the offspring of devils to do his worst.

About sunset he arrived — the mildest-looking greybeard

who ever played tricks with the consciences of his kind. All he asked was a dark room, a *ghurra*,¹ and some live charcoal. Then he shut himself up with his incantations; while the servants squatted outside in strict silence — by order.

The whole affair was conducted *sotto voce*. What the Sahib would say if he knew of such unorthodox doings, Faizullah himself did not feel sure. Success alone could justify his bold resort to primitive methods that have a shrewdness all their own.

Anthony, too wise to court suspicion, remained standing a little apart — as it were, looking on. Moti, bereft of her tongue, made scornful play with her eyes, but a shrewd observer would have noted the nervous twitching of her toes.

At last the door opened — and the offspring of devils spoke.

One by one each must enter the dark room, smite the *ghurra* three times, with open palm, and return, keeping the hand closed till the moment of revealing. The devil in the *ghurra* would know. But the innocent need not fear.

One by one they went in; their faces inscrutable, their toes twitching. One by one they returned and squatted again in the dust. Then all were bidden to open their hands. And there the truth was writ, in language that even the unlettered could read.

Twelve out of the fourteen palms exposed to view were well smudged with charcoal dust. Only those of Moti and Anthony were clean. With an expressive gesture, the gentle old man exhibited them to the assembled household. The inference was plain. They who had nothing to fear, had obeyed instructions. The guilty pair had not.

Moti waxed shrill and vituperative; Anthony remained sullen and contemptuous. By these signs Faizullah knew there would be giving of notice in the morning.

And it was so.

Challoner, returning from his early ride, was beset by cook and ayah — the pink of innocence and injured dignity — both mysteriously anxious to quit his service at once. Attempts to lodge a complaint against the Sirdar's high-handed ways were dismissed with the retort that quarrels in the compound were

¹ An earthenware vessel.

no concern of his. If there was trouble between them and the bearer, certainly they had better go.

Thereafter Faizullah begged a brief audience — his salaam deeper than usual, triumph radiating from every fold of his turban.

“Protector of the Poor — is it well?”

“It is well,” Challoner answered gravely: and for a second, their eyes encountered — as man to man. “*Subse ach-cha, bundobast wallah*, it has been quick work. Was there clear suspicion?”

“Clear to the eyes of all. Hence their anger against this slave. There came one from the city” — he confessed, hands set palm to palm — “May your Honour have mercy if zeal outran discretion —”

Challoner said nothing. The Adam’s apple in the man’s throat moved spasmodically. Then, in strictest confidence — he told all.

Behind Challoner’s inscrutable face lurked unqualified approval. Such doings, in his compound, were distinctly out of order: but he had no knowledge of them officially, and surely the end justified the means.

“Sahib, I have laid command on all,” Faizullah concluded, “that no word be said. And those that are guilty will not speak.”

Challoner smiled. “You have done very well. But you must find good substitutes. The Memsahib must not be inconvenienced.”

“*Hazûr!*” He hesitated — then boldly ventured. “If it might be — Rahât Ali? For him, there is no service like your Honour’s service.”

“I know. But Vane Memsahib is satisfied. You get me a good man — and we will see, later on.”

For Faizullah that was more than enough. It was his hour of triumph. He left the *dufter* mightily exalted in his own esteem; at peace with all the world, not even excluding the Memsahib, prime cause of all the trouble — as Memsahibs usually were, if permitted to have their way.

The same thought, differently expressed, hovered in his master’s brain, but the satisfaction of enlightening Edyth was tinged

with a natural sympathy for the vanquished. It made him feel like a culprit, though the thing had been purely her own doing; quite against his wish. To be convincing, he must tell her all; leave her no loophole to persuade herself that Faizullah had deceitfully engineered two innocents out of her service.

Before starting, he told her: found her utterly unsuspecting, obstinately sceptical. It needed all his tact and patience to pull it through.

At mention of the man from the city, her wrath with Faizullah overflowed.

"If you'll hear me *out*, Edyth," he insisted quietly, "you're welcome to criticise — afterwards."

When he spoke like that, there was nothing else for it. And the tale of that simple test, the subsequent conduct of both, so completely took the wind out of her sails that Challoner was moved to genuine sympathy, till she fell back on abusing India, where you could trust no one, where even quite superior-looking servants turned out to be common thieves.

And so on and so forth . . . Any stick was good enough to belabour the country he loved.

"Listen, Edyth," he said at parting, a hand on her shoulder. "I know it's hard on you being out here, in lots of ways; and I don't want you worried to death with servants into the bargain. I know India and I know the people — more or less. If you'll only get on with the language and give Faizullah a chance, I'll undertake that things will go smoother all round. Not a word was said to the culprits. And you mustn't speak of it either. We'll fix you up with another pair. And don't you worry about dinner."

When he had gone, she shed a few tears. He was kind and patient. The 'treasure' she had insisted on had stolen *his* things; and he never said, "I told you so." Yet she hadn't had the grace to admit that she felt half ashamed of herself.

Faizullah had triumphed all along the line. She was defeated, as the majority are defeated who kick against the pricks of the custom-ridden East: and she felt a fool for her pains. It was a salutary sensation; but, as a matter of course, she laid the blame on India — and hated it the more.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*A wave of the great waves of Destiny,
Convulsed at a checked impulse of the heart.*

GEORGE MEREDITH

IT was the last day of March. On the 2d of April, Challoner was due to leave Peshawur.

It marked the end of a chapter: and, as the last weeks dwindled to the last days, not even the lure of Kashmir could dispel his lurking reluctance to turn his back on the Border he had loved and served for more than twenty years, on old friends and his familiar work there. He scoffed at it, as a symptom of middle age; a cowardly clinging to the accustomed groove. But, for all his surface scoffing, he knew very well that his secretly adventuring spirit still retained its elasticity and zest. It was the old vague sense of premonition stealthily knocking at his heart. The dulled pain in that region — like the after-sense of an excruciating headache — made a man half afraid to move lest it return.

Here he felt comparatively safe — even comparatively happy, so long as Edyth did not too patently parade her apartness from the life and ways of the country. He had half succeeded in damping down the hidden thing that he kept inviolate, almost from himself, in the hidden recesses of his soul. Here it was just possible. How would it be in Kashmir?

It had given him keen pleasure to help little Chris carry out her impetuous flight; for he knew, and approved, the reason. He had lent her Shere Ali — a very gallant gentleman — for escort to Baramulla, where she had been welcomed with open arms by Mrs. Vane — and the inevitable Thorne! It was good to know, from Kaye, that he had virtually spoken to Chris; that there was a reasonable hope of things coming right in the summer if . . . ? Her condition had been implied without direct allusion to Mrs. Vane.

But, at the moment, farewell dinners and a half-dismantled bungalow and a plague of packing-cases — in league to bark the

shins of the unwary — blocked the forward view. In his spare time, he and Faizullah slaved like coolies: so, to do her credit, did Mrs. Sham. But this afternoon — when the sun's heat waned — he had fled from it all with Eve. Having first offered Edyth a drive, which she refused, he had ordered the horses, with a clear conscience, for himself and the child.

He had a fancy, before leaving, to spend a quiet hour on the old Gor Kutri, the tower that rises in the midst, with all Peshawur — savage, restless, inimitable Peshawur — sprawling and seething at its feet. And Eve asked nothing better than a last glimpse of that wonderland of roofs, of India's mothers and babies, that so haunted her imaginative brain.

They were up there now, the low sun of early evening raking the housetops. The streets below — already in shadow — hummed and shrilled with the unhasting, unresting life of the anything-but-silent East.

Out of the deep, confused murmur, like the humming of an angry hive, rose clear jets of sound: the metallic clang of copper-smiths at work; strident voices wrangling or bargaining; a shrill scream, suggesting some hidden horror; the long-drawn call to prayer from slender minarets, springing out of the squalor below, like flowers from rank soil. And, nearer by, from the wilderness of housetops, came the shrill treble of women gossiping, laughing, quarrelling, in their roof-pens of lath and plaster; shouts of boys and young men, training quails or flying pigeons — hundreds of them. At a signal, the birds arose, whirring, wheeling, and shimmering, as they turned in their flight. At a signal, they fluttered down again with their ceaseless murmur of sound.

All over the city, pigeons and more pigeons hovered, like a living cloud scattered abroad in flakes of silver and jade and mother-o'-pearl. And everywhere among them crows swooped and clamoured, black as original sin.

If dawn is the magic hour of the West, early evening is the magic hour of the East. Even upon the stark unloveliness of Northern India it lays a passing spell of enchantment — on colourless plain and commonplace bungalows and the incarnate threat of the Frontier hills. Harsh and aggressive at noon, they

now seemed withdrawn miles away, brooding in their sunset splendour — rose and olive-green, dusky purple and indigo-black. For Challoner, they were a sensible presence, always; and to-night he was too keenly aware of his deep, instinctive reluctance to leave them and all they had stood for in his life.

To certain natures, surroundings are merely surroundings; to others, they are inwoven with the very fabric of thought and spirit. So, to Challoner, those eternally inimical, eternally fascinating Border hills had become a part of himself. He would miss them and desire them even among the manifold glories of Kashmir. But such thoughts were not to be encouraged; rank sentimentalism . . .

He shifted his gaze from them to Eve — very slim and boyish-looking in her khaki riding-gear and skirted coat — leaning on the parapet, chin in her hands, watching the world of brown women and golden-brown babies; silent, absorbed; leaving him quiet to think his thoughts. Larry lay close to her, sleeping peacefully; very real companions they three.

The hum from the city was quieter now; the crows were not quite so aggressive. The murmur of innumerable doves seemed to fill the sky. Suddenly from a roof close by came the twanging of a zither, softly melodious, and a woman's voice crooning to it in a minor key.

Instantly Eve looked round at him — where he sat, on the low wall.

“*Daddy!*” There was ecstasy in her low tone; in her lifted hand. Not another word till the crooning ceased. Then: “*What is it?*” she asked, still very low.

“A zither!”

“What a scrumptious name! I wish it would go on. It's the kind of music that gives you beautiful creeps inside. D'*you* ever feel it that way?”

“I do,” he assented gravely.

“The piano's awfully nice — but it doesn't.”

“No — it doesn't. The violin and 'cello for me.”

She nodded vigorously, her face alight. “I've only once heard the 'cello. It *is* funny — how we think the same.”

"Oh, it's very funny — my daughter!" he said, with his twinkle.

She eyed him reproachfully. "Don't be sarcastic at me, Daddy. Do daughters always —?"

"Not quite always. Oftener than sons, though. It's very nice — for the fathers — when they do."

She came and laid a hand on his knee. "I'm awfully glad I do."

"So am I."

They were silent, listening for the zither — that did not come again. Having touched their lives with a ghostly finger, it was mute.

Then, purely on impulse, Challoner said: "Eve — would you like to learn the violin?"

She confronted him, large-eyed — and he was answered. "*Me?* Oh, Daddums! *Can I?*"

Something jerked inside him. "I oughtn't to have said that," he thought. "Why the devil . . .?" No recalling it now. The spoken word, like a winged seed, was gone upon its errand . . .

"Can I, Daddy?" She plucked at his arm, recalling him to the one matter of moment. "Here — in India?"

"Yes . . . you can." His words were weighted now with a sense of the irrevocable. "In Kashmir. That's to say — if you've a quick enough ear."

"Oh, I have! Madame Joli said so. But Mummy said the piano — so I could play for Beryl to sing." He smiled at that so characteristic reason. — "But *I* don't care about singing. *Who* can teach me, Daddy, up there?"

"A friend of mine — Mrs. Vane."

"Is she awfully nice?"

"Awfully nice."

She slipped a hand in his and leaned against him. "Do ask her, Daddy — with your special smile! — *I am* having luck in India — aren't I?"

His arm enclosed her, as if shielding her from the jealous gods of the East — who might overhear.

"You ought really to be at school, you know, like all the other correct little girls!" he chaffed her, to lighten the vague oppres-

sion within him. "You can thank your stars you don't own a correct Daddy!"

"I'm thanking them fearfully — all the time."

He laughed. His passing qualm was gone.

The sun and the hills were drawing together, now, wraiths of mist crept along the valley of Peshawur — green with young corn.

"It strikes me, we've both got to be correct — and hurry back. I'm dining out."

"Five minutes more," she pleaded, trading on his incorrectness. "It's so lovely up here. The bungalow's all horrid and messed about."

He nodded feelingly.

"Are you sorry to go? Do you like Peshawur?" he asked, to cover his surrender.

"I love it. I've never been so happy before. Sometimes I feel mad crazy with happiness. There was a girl at school used to say it was a bad sign. She was Scotch."

"Which it's a fine thing to be! But she was talking nonsense." (He wished he could feel quite sure of it.) "You'll be just as happy in Kashmir — the most beautiful place on earth."

"Will I — with the fiddle and all? I'm terribly excited over that."

"Don't let the fiddle run away with you! It depends — on Mrs. Vane."

She leaned closer, drawing out the coveted five minutes with feminine guile.

"Tell me about your Mrs. Vane."

His frown was a contraction of pain. He had neatly let himself in. But he told her — as best he could . . .

Then they crept down the dark narrow stairs to their waiting horses and cantered home.

He dined at the Club that evening — quite a big affair, organised by Harland, Copeland, and others. The outcrop of farewell dinners — if not always to his taste — was the inevitable British way of expressing appreciation and genuine regret at losing him.

Yesterday, he had suffered gladly the embarrassing attentions of a large meeting organised by his Indian friends and subordinates: a monumentally tedious affair of speech on speech, and linked compliments long drawn out; but none the less gratifying for that. In times so hostile and uncertain, when the Englishman is consistently vilified, even by moderate Indian journals — his motives impugned, his presence in the country bracketed with every evil, real or imaginary — it heartened a man, who had done his indefatigable best, to receive public proof that there were those who appreciated, who understood — so far as that rash word can ever be applied to East and West.

The deeper understanding goes, among the few Anglo-Indians who can justly lay claim to it, the clearer waxes that hidden sense of age-old mysteries and forces beyond the ken of any mere Westerner — and an official, at that. Secure in his uprightness and humanity — tinged, here and there, with over-confidence and egotism — he of the West transfers his ideals to the East, as he sees it, which is very seldom the East as it is. Authority and lordship over external affairs give the flattering illusion of a builded world — of surface peace and prosperity. But everywhere the surface is gashed with chasms, mental and spiritual, that at any moment may emit volcanic fires; everywhere it vibrates with the ghostly mutter of subterranean thunder. Of these things only the imaginative are aware. The rest laugh them to scorn. And Challoner, by virtue of that two-edged gift, came as near true vision as the white man may.

If Public recognition heartened him, individual Indians, calling on him and pouring themselves out to him, at immense length, touched him more nearly still. That he could not respond in kind was simply a disability of his race — one that has been fruitful of much misunderstanding. Indians in the main are a sentimental people, easily touched, easily influenced; and, to them, it often seems that the Sahib, from sheer pride of superiority, wilfully hides the thoughts of his heart. The Sahib in question was a past-master at keeping them hid; but these personal outpourings moved him to respond in his own inadequate fashion.

Frankly, the whole thing came as a pleasant surprise to him.

He was singularly unaware of the impression he made on others. He knew himself unsociable; disliked here and there; respected in the main. For such wholesale appreciation, he had been altogether unprepared.

And it pleased him more than a little to perceive that Edyth was patently flattered and impressed. The less tongue-tied among his own people said nice things to her, which she duly repeated to him. They made him feel prickly and uncomfortable; but they gratified her — which was all to the good.

Nor did she disguise her relief at getting away from the Frontier. The increasing heat prostrated her. Packing was a weariness of the flesh — though Mrs. Sham and the new, chirpy little ayah did the greater part of it; and Faizullah was a born adept in the mysteries of *bundobast* and the oiling of wheels. With secret satisfaction, Challoner noted how she was tacitly coming to rely on the man; though, Edyth-like, she shirked admitting it.

Thus, ably assisted, she expended most of her energies sitting in a comfortable chair, suggesting and directing, fanning herself incessantly and complaining of the heat; quite convinced that she was arduously doing her share.

Now and then he detected flushed eyelids, and thought, "No doubt, poor dear, she bitterly wishes she was packing for Home." It made him feel a brute, now that he better understood what lurked behind it all. Because of that blessed baby, hideously snatched from her, she would never forget, never forgive. Her oddly unemotional tenacity suggested depths somewhere. Had she ever been capable of caring so for him, goodness knew how differently things might have gone.

All these years they had eaten the fruit of life more or less together without ever tasting the full flavour of it. Now, for both — it seemed — this over-long separation had done vital damage, past mending.

The next afternoon he came on her unexpectedly, sitting alone at her bureau weeding out pigeon-holes.

A long side drawer stood open, bristling with letters. She was poring over one of them, head on hand. A faint, unmistakable

sniff, and the dejection of her pose moved him to do what he could.

Absorbed in her reading, she seemed unaware of his approach. "Poor old lady — hard luck!" he began.

At his voice, she almost jumped; and thrust her letter hurriedly into the drawer.

"Ian, I wish you wouldn't startle me so! Creeping about like a native —"

Sympathy evaporated. He had recognised Harrison's writing. It was not all Tony.

"Sorry," he said, turning away. "I've slippers on. I'll invest in a pair of creaking bazaar boots — for your benefit."

And, without waiting for an answer, he left her.

Back in his study he found himself strangely shaken by a sudden flood of bitterness that welled up from the depths of his distracted heart. The irony of the thing cut deep. Here was she girding at him for bringing her here, keeping her here. And now she had come, his heart had no real need of her — nor hers, it seemed, of him.

To be brutally frank, had he any right — husband or no — to keep her away from her children, her precious Carl and her presumably innocuous admirer, mainly, as it were, virtually to save him from himself?

For one critical instant he felt like going straight back and telling her plainly he could no longer hold her in India against her will; bidding her book the first available passage Home. God knew what might come to pass in Kashmir — if he returned alone. Apparently it would not matter much to her, one way or the other . . .

He had actually turned to go when a thought checked him, like a ghostly hand on his shoulder — Eve! Eve, crazy with happiness, counting on Kashmir, could not be summarily whisked off Home because he and Edyth had made a hash of things. Nor could he keep her here without her mother . . .

The flame of his desperate impulse was snuffed out like a candle. Clearly they must all hang on together for the present. If Kashmir failed . . . ?

Well, it might come to chucking India, eking out his pension with a humdrum job at Home — breaking his heart all round . . .

He was dining with the Gunners that evening — and glad of it. When the time came, Edyth was changing; and he went in to say good-night. There had been no allusion to their jar; only a slight constraint in the air.

She was sitting at her glass with her hair down, in the pink silk jacket of bungalow days, thinking what a queer, uncomfortable man he was; the more uncomfortable, the more one cared. And latterly she seemed to be caring as she had certainly not done at first. It was stupid snapping at him like that because Hensley's letter was upsetting her, and she didn't want him to see. Sometimes Hensley did pour forth too freely. She rather liked it herself, but she was not sure if Ian would.

He came up behind her chair, looking very distinguished, but rather formidable.

"Good-night," he said, a hand on her shoulder.

And suddenly she stood up facing him. She could not let him go like that.

"Ian . . . don't be annoyed. I didn't mean . . . you jumped me so . . ."

"Oh, that's all right. The heart knows its own bitterness. Sorry I got in the way."

"But — it wasn't that. I . . . Ian —"

Her lips trembled into a smile — the softest one that had done most of the damage.

Furious with himself, he took her in his arms, kissed her good-night, and left her — renewed compunction and bewilderment at his heart. So it went on — to and fro; so it would go on, presumably . . . as long as they both should live . . .

It was all over — the last days, the last evening, consecrated to the Raynes alone; the strain of the last few hours . . .

More than half Peshawur, civil and military, was assembled at the station to see them off. And in addition to English friends, there were Indians of all classes — sixty or seventy of them: a very fair contingent in these changed times, when it

needed moral courage publicly to express devotion or gratitude to a Sahib.

Those who had so ventured — barristers, *tehsildars*, court *chaprassis*, and a score of humbler folk — expressed it unreservedly after their kind.

There were cartwheel bouquets of marigolds and roses, jasmine wreaths heavily scented — which Challoner evaded by garlanding Eve, to her immense delight. There were rupees held out to 'touch and remit'; long-winded petitions, and stout Mahomedans weeping unashamed. There was Rustum Khan, with flowers for the Memsahib and a tiny *ghurra* of sugar candy for the Miss-Sahib, and a few urgent last words on a fresh boundary dispute lately arisen. There was Mahomed Hussein — now, thanks to Challoner, in Government employ — proffering attar of rose in a green glass phial, tears of grateful affection bedewing his beard.

Grasping Challoner's hand, he bowed low and touched it with his forehead. "May the Sahib soon return to Peshawur, that we who miss the radiation of your presence may behold yet again the fascinating beams of a simper on your Honour's noble countenance."

It was to Challoner's credit that the 'beams of a simper' were not immediately forthcoming . . .

A whistle shrilled — and at last he escaped into his carriage, where Eve and Edyth had gone before. Kaye secured the final handclasp; Rayne the last word. "Think shame of yourself deserting us. But you'll come back to the Border yet!"

A Gunner Major shouted, "For he's a jolly good fellow." Others caught up the refrain. The chorus rose and swelled to the station roof; swelled yet again to a prolonged cheer, as the train clanked and jolted . . . and they were off . . .

Challoner leaned out and waved till the massed platform faded to a blur. Then he sank into his corner seat — exaltation checked by a stealthy tightening of the heart — and automatically picked up the "Weekly Times."

Edyth remained looking out a moment longer, thrilled as her placid nature was rarely thrilled; carried out of herself by a quite

unusual access of pride and pleasure. Moved by a scarcely less unusual desire to express her feelings, she turned to her husband — only to find him barricaded behind a newspaper.

The whole thing had been so gratifying, so exciting, that she felt badly let down. Such a great occasion — he might show his pleasure a little, or at least appreciate hers. And he just sat there reading the paper.

She could not know that he was staring at the printed page without taking in a word; that he held it up as a barrier, simply because he could not trust himself to speak.

Eve snuggled close to him, her head against his arm.

Edyth sat apart and stared disconsolately out at the hated face of India gliding by — malign and mysterious, in the deepening dusk . . .

END OF PHASE III

PHASE FOUR
THE MOMENT ETERNAL

PHASE FOUR
THE MOMENT ETERNAL
CHAPTER ONE

*Spirits are not finely touched
But to fine issues.*

SHAKESPEARE

“ONE minute, Eve. Take that ‘f’ again. You didn’t get it quite true. You just grazed it. That’s better. D’you hear?”

“Yes — got it then!”

“Got it! Now — softly and slowly, not too much of a drag; as if you were telling a sad story, and not letting the sadness run away with you.”

Softly and slowly — putting all she knew how into the wailing melody — Eve repeated the opening phrase of one of Chopin’s simpler Nocturnes, taking the single notes, while Vanessa improvised an accompaniment from the bass.

It was a great moment — playing her first ‘piece,’ with her very own fiddle tucked under her chin. She had started on one of Mrs. Vane’s — one that belonged to her father — till they saw if she was going to be worth it. Then came her birthday — and a ‘surprise’ fiddle from Daddy, which told her *he* thought she was worth it, anyhow.

That was in May, at Srinagar. Now it was the middle of June. They were up in the Gulmarg Residency on the ridge above the Circular Road. They had been practising hard lately. So it looked as if ‘Vinessa’ thought she was worth it, too. The new Chopin piece made her feel fearfully proud; and being allowed to call Daddy’s Mrs. Vane ‘Vinessa’ — when even Daddy didn’t — made her feel prouder still. She had picked up the name from Chris; and the first time she tried it, rather shyly, she had been kissed by way of a scolding: the nicest scolding she ever had. She had told Vinessa so, and made her laugh. She had a topping

laugh. And you could always tell her anything — almost like Daddy. She never talked 'down at you,' like so many grown-ups — wanting to show off how much cleverer they were; never dreaming that all the time *you* thought them simply fools . . .

From which it may be inferred that these two had been instantly drawn to each other as Challoner had foreseen. His request that Vanessa should teach the child had brought them dangerously near to open friction. At mention of terms and payment, all her quickened sensibilities were up in arms. She had refused point-blank.

"That puts the lid on it," he had said, with decision. "I'm sorry. We were rather keen — Eve and I."

For a moment she had felt bitterly hurt. "I'm keen, too. I don't *want* payment," was the most she dared say.

He had punctured her argument with his prompt rejoinder. "If we all refused payment because we were keen, some of us would be hard put to it for a livelihood."

That settled matters. She could see a stone wall by daylight. Her finances were none too flourishing; and, sooner than disappoint him, she had surrendered at discretion.

In a general way, teaching music irked her as it irks most gifted musicians. She was impatient of the slow progress, of the constant repetition involved. But Ian Challoner's daughter, with his very eyes and his very smile, was another pair of sleeves. The joy of drawing her out, of discovering in her the real gift latent in her father, helped her to swallow the intermittent cheque; though she hated the thing — especially when bestowed by Mrs. Challoner, as on the last occasion, because he had remained in Srinagar for the Maharajah's birthday festivities, and only came up two days ago.

She had not yet seen him. She hoped for a glimpse this morning. Hence the primrose silk gown, of her own knitting, and the peacock butterfly brooch — a flawless specimen shrined in glass and set in antique silver — his Christmas gift to her.

It was proving harder than she had guessed, this beautiful and perilous affair of a friendship that, for her, was infinitely more than friendship; this living on stray crumbs, so to speak, with

the memory of those wonderful weeks — when all time was their own — so terribly clear in her mind . . .

Her thoughts had strayed sinfully while Eve was playing; but she heard every note, and marvelled at the expression the child already began to draw from the strings.

When the simple opening melody ran into triplets, Vanessa took it up and played the remainder, to give her the general idea. In this lavish giving of ideas lay the main inspiration of her teaching, for those who could follow. She abhorred explanations. Pupils who could not catch an intimation on the wing were simply not worth her while.

Eve — if she could not invariably follow — drank it all in, as the earth drinks dew. The tender closing chords made her feel lovely inside, like the touch of her father's hand.

"There — that's how *you'll* do it soon," Vanessa told her as one who knows. "Then — Daddy shall hear it."

Eve let out an immense sigh. She was living for that proud moment. Her arm and hand still felt a little shaky; and Vanessa made a few soothing passes down it.

"It's done splendidly," she said. "We'll have the Nocturne once more, when it's rested a little."

"*You* play, now," Eve begged. "Do the bagpipes. They squirm me so."

Vanessa laughed. "All right. I'll squirm you."

She picked up the violin and made it speak with tongues; with the brave, adventuring spirit of Scotland, and the sad half-tones — as it were the streak of Northern melancholy, tinged with courage with a hint of fatalism: the very spirit of Eve's own father.

She was not a little proud of this minor accomplishment, which she had wrought to a rare pitch of perfection; the deep, continuous drone issuing from the lower strings; while her fingers, higher up, picked out the shrill, brave overtone — sad, rhythmic, savage, according to her chosen ditty. In war-time hospitals she had skirled sick Highlanders out of their beds; had set them whooping and sword-dancing, between crutches filched from their comrades, till the whole ward was in an uproar.

To-day she chose "Flowers of the Forest"; and Eve stood lis-

tening with a set, intent face that made her look strangely like her father.

The wail of it proved too much for Larry. Squirmed to the marrow, he arose and wailed in sympathy, nose uplifted, ears glued back, his body vibrating with an ecstasy of anguish.

Vanessa put down the violin. "Damn the dog!" she said, under her breath; adding aloud: "He'll wake the dead — and we shall get into hot water —"

"But, Vinessa — he was singing. He goes with the notes. Listen —"

She took up the fiddle and tried him with a note or two, Larry ecstatically following suit.

"Eve, *dear*," Vanessa remonstrated — too late.

The door opened; and Edyth Challoner appeared — justly indignant.

"She's alive, for once," was Vanessa's irreverent thought. "We've fairly resurrected her!"

"*Stop* that, Eve!" she commanded sharply.

To Vanessa, she spoke with an air of contained politeness more maddening than anger.

"I'm sorry to interrupt a lesson, Mrs. Vane." (The faint emphasis set Vanessa's teeth on edge.) "But I've got a bad headache to-day, and the violin *does* so get on one's nerves."

Vanessa drew herself up — very slim and erect. "If that's so, it seems a pity she should learn."

"It was her father's wish," said Edyth, an implicit martyr to wifely duty. "And, of course, when the child can play better, it won't sound so — so excruciatingly out of tune."

An imp of humour danced in Vanessa's eyes. "Oh — that? You mustn't blame Eve. It was I who was playing just then."

For a second, Edyth stood speechless. Then: "Oh, well — I beg your pardon: it sounded . . ."

"Naturally it did! I apologise —"

"Mummy, it was bagpipes — and Larry —" Eve struck in, purely to champion Vanessa. "Didn't you *hear*?"

"Of course I heard," her mother almost snapped. "And if the dog can't control himself, he must be tied up during your lesson."

That was too much for Eve. Larry was a person. She couldn't bear him to be called 'the dog,' as if he were a table or a chair. She made a move to protect him and spoke with unguarded vehemence: "Mummy, he shan't be tied up. He *can* control himself. He was singing. We *made* him —"

"If I wish it, Eve, he will be tied up. You're perfectly idiotic over that dog. And, as you can't control yourself, you'd better go to your own room."

When her mother spoke in that tone, Eve, the disobedient, knew better than to rebel. With head erect and a fury of resentment in her heart, she stalked out — leaving the two women face to face, their mutual antagonism so precariously near the surface that Vanessa had a sudden crazy feeling, "If Mrs. Challoner moves a step nearer, we shall crash like two thunder-clouds and lightnings will fly."

Detest the woman as she might, there must be no open quarrel — for every reason.

"How long will Eve be gone?" she asked, with studied quietness. "Her lesson isn't finished yet."

"Oh, well, whatever she's missed, you can deduct . . ."

"Deduct — ?" Vanessa, in a blaze of fury, dashed the words aside. "I was thinking of Eve. She has done specially well this morning. She's keen to get on with her Nocturne; I was only giving her a breather . . ."

"I see." Edyth was frigidly polite. "A pity it didn't take another form."

"It won't take that form again" — Vanessa was a well-bred icicle. "But I do feel — it's hard on Eve . . ."

"I'm never hard on her, if she behaves herself. She's out here by her father's wish. I have to see she doesn't suffer from it. She has a good deal of character. And she mustn't get out of hand. Miss Minton's simply under her thumb. I hoped *you* might be a little firmer."

That roused the devil in Vanessa. It was not a first offence.

"Really, Mrs. Challoner! I'm not Eve's governess," she flared out unguardedly. "When Colonel Challoner spoke about the violin, I wanted to teach her — for the pleasure of it. Only — he insisted —"

"He was quite right. You give a lot of time to her. We couldn't possibly let you do it . . . for nothing."

"It wouldn't be . . . for nothing. It would be — for love." Vanessa spoke more gently, though the primitive woman prompted her to scratch — hard. She had only one aim in mind; Eve's release. "The child has a real gift. I enjoy teaching her —"

"It's very nice of you to put it that way." Edyth saw she had failed in tact — and felt awkward. Nothing would annoy Ian more. "Of course, I didn't mean — only the child is with you a good deal. And she's headstrong. It would be a help . . ."

"Well, I'm ready to help. But I confess I never have any trouble with her. And I'm sure she didn't mean to be impertinent. Of course, if you don't wish me to finish the lesson . . . if the noise worries you . . .?"

"Oh, no — it didn't, until . . . It was only — the bagpipes . . ." Edyth fairly tumbled over herself in her anxiety to avoid the fatal word. "I'll go and speak to Eve — and send her back in a few minutes. She must be made to understand —"

And the woman who, in the deeper sense, could neither understand nor impart understanding, gracefully faded away.

Vanessa left alone in the drawing-room — that had charmed her in earlier days — let her glance wander here and there, noting one detail and another: the soft green Kashmir carpet, the dark furniture, and regally embroidered curtains, the fastidiously chosen treasures of carving and metal work and ivory that spoke to her of the man she insanely continued to love without limit and without hope.

From two slim vases sprang tall spires of porcelain blue delphinium. There were Canterbury bells, pink and blue; bowls of roses and maidenhair fern; Eve's doing. How she could love the place; inform it with her very self! And Mrs. Challoner informed it with nothing but her magazines and Home papers, her account books and her children's photographs — there on the bureau. The elder pair were patently her own. The small boy had a fugitive look of his father about him that caught at Vanessa's heart. And instantaneously she had noted the hands.

But for her the one eternal point of interest was an oval photograph of the man himself, in a rough silver frame. It was simply his head and shoulders, in uniform. He looked not much over thirty; the mouth a shade less bitter, the eyes a shade less sad. Had that bitterness and sadness been Mrs. Challoner's gifts to him in the last ten years?

Needless to say, she had been antagonised at sight; and she suspected that antagonism was mutual; sheer temperamental aversion — nothing more. The woman could not have an inkling . . . She was the sort that ran in blinkers. She would never look straight at anything likely to make her uncomfortable.

It was bad luck — in some ways. Had she really liked Ian Challoner's wife, it might have eased things a little. Till the moment of meeting she had been quite in the dark; had never even seen a photograph: and in the bitterness of her heart, she had felt half angry with him — that he could ever have been unperceptive enough to fall in love with . . . *that!*

Perhaps there were other factors? Who was she to cast that particular stone?

With an effort, she wrenched herself away from that magnetic photograph, that shrine of the eternal domesticities that were not for her; and wandered over to the glassed frontage — that had once been a verandah. French windows opened onto the familiar garden, with its English atmosphere of tennis lawn and rose-bushes and herbaceous borders, its Himalayan setting of stately forest trees — blue pine and maple and silver fir.

A bird-haunted garden it was. Vanessa had scores of personal acquaintances among its shrubs and trees. By the courtesy of former friendly Residents, she had often spent a night in the summer-house with its inimitable view of Nanga Parbat, uncrowned queen of Kashmir; had seen her, at dawn, blue-veiled, ethereal, through a vista of pine and fir — their rugged boughs ink-black against the brightness of her rising. Last year, she remembered, a pair of golden orioles had been her main preoccupation . . .

Only last year — and she another woman in another world. She had simply met a man — of all commonplace contingencies! Yet her whole being was transformed. This late blossoming of

her emotional nature — the joy and the pain of it subtly inter-fused — had quickened and deepened all her artistic faculties; and other faculties also; or she would not be so seriously distressing herself over poor Major Thorne, who vowed he would never desist till she gave him the one answer it was out of her power to give.

And he must needs go and break his leg into the bargain. Otherwise by now he would have been safe up at Leh. Four months' respite might have brought him to his senses. But Mr. Rawlins had taken his place, and here was he, installed at Gulmarg as Assistant Resident for the season.

It had been her own fault, as usual. Their adventurous climb, after a mythical *bara singh*, had been entirely her doing. And what a desperate affair it had proved, getting that big man home, helpless and in pain! How could any decent woman avoid being tender to him? And how could a man in love let slip so apt an opportunity? It seemed she had done the damage at Kargil. Instinctively, she had used him as a buffer to ward off Kaye; and here was Fate hitting back at her with merciless precision.

Her genuine concern and the unusual ache of responsibility suggested hidden leaf buds uncurled in regions other than æsthetic. The earlier Vanessa had rarely been afflicted with qualms over the very normal phenomenon of a man in love. Even last year, poor Kaye's distress had not troubled her as Major Thorne's plight troubled her now. It seemed she was growing an embryo conscience in respect of men and their passionate predicaments. Whose doing was that . . . ?

And for her own sake she heartily wished Major Thorne elsewhere; lest he stumble upon her secret. Too well she knew that love is not a blindness, but a quickened vision: and it was bad enough that Chris — sanest and sturdiest of lovers — had found her out. It was not a matter for discussion. But since her arrival there had come a moment when Vanessa knew that Chris knew . . .

At first she had hotly resented the idea of such knowledge shared without her sanction. But Chris was a privileged being; and, by degrees, her own solitary spirit had found comradeship and a

measure of relief in the girl's deep-hearted understanding that neither criticised nor forced the sympathetic note. To Vanessa, the last would have been more intolerable than the first. If Kaye did not play up when he arrived, she would never forgive him — or herself either. It was crushing luck that he had not secured first leave . . .

She looked at her watch. Would *he* turn up before lunch?

She ought to be ashamed, at six-and-thirty, feeling shaken and fluttered like a girl of eighteen — with the Church and the Law and all frowning implacably on her unauthorised sensations, and her embryo conscience asserting itself. Inevitably, one began to see with his eyes, and to measure things by his standards, that were not as the standards of Haydn Valmont, or of Bob Vane. The simple fact of what he was acted like a lever. In some ways it made life more difficult; but still —

Another glance at her watch. How about this interrupted music lesson; for which she was to *deduct* . . . ! Positively she could have struck the woman!

Ah, at last! A door opened and shut . . .

Eve was back again, her eyes dancing.

"Oh, dear! Am I so very dretful?" she enquired, head tilted like a bird.

"I don't find you so." Vanessa answered truthfully, quite aware that she ought to have lied about it in the interests of discipline. "But then . . . I'm only a Peacock Butterfly!" She turned it off — in the interests of fair play. It was not fair play to foster rebellion.

"Is Vinessa . . . a Butterfly?" Eve was caressing the brooch with one finger-tip.

"Several butterflies. I'm Vanessa Io — the Peacock, symbol of vanity! It's as if my fanciful father knew I'd some day become Vane . . . in both senses!" she punned without shame.

"*You* aren't vain!" Eve flatly contradicted her — sermons forgotten. "And if you were, why shouldn't you be? *Look* at you!"

"I'd a good deal sooner look at you!"

Vanessa spoke lightly; but something in her eyes, her voice, made the child flush with pleasure.

"I *do* love you!" she said in her quick, vehement fashion.

And then — somehow — she was in Vanessa's arms, loving her more than ever.

For Vanessa held her close, without a word, her unfulfilled motherhood stirred to the point of pain. Her delight in children — their clear outlook, their unconscious egotism — was more artistic than sentimental. They, on their part, were attracted instinctively, by her attitude of humorous detachment, her incurable trick of siding with them against authority, as such, even her own. But no child had so singled her out, as equal and comrade: and his daughter . . . of all others . . . !

They were still entwined when the door opened without warning — and Colonel Challoner entered, quietly closing it behind him.

"Caught out!" she greeted him — lightly dismissing her exalted moment. Her eyes, partly because of Eve, partly because he had taken her unawares, were brighter than they had any business to be. And his own — also because of Eve — had an unusual softness; the frosty sparkle extinct.

"This is the way we learn the fiddle!" he chaffed her, to veil his deeper feeling.

"There *are* other methods!" she admitted demurely. And Eve, with her "Daddy!" straightway deserted Vanessa for the real thing. "*She* says I'm truly getting on. We were just having a — what d'you call it . . . intermezzo — ?"

"*Entr'acte?*" Challoner suggested, twitching her hair.

"Yes — bagpipes and Larry. Daddy, you simply must hear!"

"My *dear* Eve!" Vanessa's voice had an unguarded note that made Challoner fling her a quick look . . .

Eve tossed her hair and laughed. She was incorrigible. "Oh, I mean somewhere — far away in the garden. You see, Mummy didn't like them. They squirmed her too much."

"They would!" Challoner's smile was discretion itself. "And now I'm interrupting. We'd better clear out — Larry and I." (A pinprick of memory stabbed Vanessa: and more than a pinprick of disappointment. After three weeks, he might have shaken hands. He hardly ever did.)

"No — you're *not* to clear out," Eve was commanding him — as she had commanded that morning in the orchard, blissfully unaware of Edyth and Eve. "We can't do it now, because you'd hear. And it's to be a surprise."

"If she came to the hotel this afternoon," Vanessa suggested. "We could finish at Thea Leigh's piano. I shall be there practising *my* surprise!"

"Oh — when's that coming off?"

Was it fancy — or did she detect a just perceptible change of tone?

"Chris says we must wait for Kaye. So it is to be early next month. Thea's a marvel — seeing she is really a violinist, and of course, it's my part she longs to play. Eve might enjoy our rehearsal — if it suits Mrs. Challoner?"

Eve jiggled like a thing on wires. "Oh, Vinessa, you're simply IT!"

"You are answered," said Challoner, indicating his daughter, without further allusion to the concert. "I've nothing to add — except the trivial suggestion that you stay to tiffin. And if the lesson's off, come into the garden." He hesitated a second, then jerked out casually, "Old Thorne's hobbling about the lawn — in hopes; watching the tits at their ablutions in your bird tank."

Her zest for the garden evaporated. But there was no help for it. They went out and watched the birds in her shallow tank, at the far end of the lawn. She had begged leave to install one in the Srinagar garden; and of his own accord he had suggested a smaller one up here. In countless little ways like that, unobtrusively, wordlessly, he gave her pleasure; proved himself her friend.

Major Thorne, large and unwieldy, could hobble about now on a pair of stout sticks. His lazy face lit up at sight of her: and of course he held out his hand — though it was only the day before yesterday.

While they watched the birds, Colonel Challoner wandered off and cut roses for her — Fortune's yellow, Persian briar, and spikes of delphinium — the primrose-pale variety.

He held them towards her, looking critically from the flowers to her gown. "I've hit it off — eh?"

She could only murmur some inane platitude. It was too much joy — having him back: though it was a joy that quivered into pain.

A little before tiffin, Major Borden turned up — and was asked to stay. Vanessa disliked the man. Her extensive experience of the wrong sort quickened her flair for the type. He was discreetly making up to Mrs. Challoner with good dinners, good wine and cigars at the back of his mind.

Colonel Challoner eyed him critically. *He* would see it — if Mrs. Challoner did not.

Lunch ended, they strolled over — the four of them — to Nedou's Hotel, that rambled among pine woods above the golf links and the polo ground. Here Thea Leigh — with her seven-year-old son — was established for the season, in her favourite corner rooms, with her own private strip of verandah boarded off; the boards masked with shelves and pots of ferns that made Thea's Corner a landmark from afar.

Vanessa, at starting, skilfully paired Major Thorne with the child. For that brief walk she *would* have Colonel Challoner to herself. What harm?

He carried her flowers, and told her, in his humorous vein, about the Maharajah's festivities. She spoke of her music, with a tentative allusion to the Tone Poem that eclipsed all other interests at the moment. For some quaint masculine reason, he never rose to that theme. It had been her one acute disappointment. She had felt so sure it would give him particular pleasure to know that his gift had inspired her first ambitious excursion into the delights and distractions of composing. He knew she had only done small things, so far, and part of a sonata unfinished. Yet his interest fell lamentably short of her hopes . . .

Arrived at the hotel, they were greeted from the corner verandah by Thea Leigh — a beautiful woman, who held herself queenly. The sun made a burnished halo of her autumn-tinted hair. Her grey summer frock had a wide black sash. She had lost her best loved brother, after the Lahore rising last year.

"Come in, you two as well," she called to the men. "Are you after golf, Colonel Challoner? My husband's pining for a round."

"Tell Leigh I'll join him at the Club with pleasure, in half an hour's time," Challoner called back. "I'm not allowed in, just now — by order! That's a fact, isn't it?" he twitted Vanessa, with a sidelong smile that gave her spirits a sudden lift.

"Your exemplary obedience is discounted by your patent lack of curiosity."

"Which is a libel," he retorted — and, unexpectedly, looked her straight in the eyes. "Good-bye. Good luck to the rehearsal!"

This time he did shake hands. His fingers closed on hers deliberately; held them hard; — and, as deliberately, let them go. Apart from the thrill of contact there was something magnetic in his touch. To-day it imparted a clear conviction that whatever else failed her — in the long run — courage would not fail . . .

CHAPTER TWO

The tongue is a little member . . .

ST. JAMES

"DEAR Mrs. Challoner, I hope I haven't worried you badly. But I felt it was only a friend's part just to mention the little things that are said here and there. People are *so* gossipy and spiteful. It's unwise to give them a handle — you know what I mean? They always seem worse in the hills, because they've so little to do."

Thus Mrs. Chamier, the good-hearted — like the proverbial fowl before a mirror — valiantly attacked her own image in her own defence, while taking leave of Edyth Challoner in the Residency porch.

"Yes — I know . . ." Edyth's eyes were a shade more inexpressive than usual. "But really there's nothing they *can* say — about my husband. And he wouldn't take any notice if they did."

"That's what I tell them. They might let the *Resident's* name alone. If it was any other woman . . . But Mrs. Vane has an unfortunate knack of making herself conspicuous. Always some fresh man in tow. They mostly drop her. She's so superficial. But it seems a pity . . ."

An angry mutter of thunder — as if the very heavens were impatient of her much speaking — attracted her attention to the sky; passionate blue overhead, ink-black beyond the pines.

"It's coming," she sagely predicted; "I always feel it in my head."

Edyth was mildly solicitous. "If you don't hurry, I'm afraid you'll get wet."

"Well . . . I must make a dash for it." The invitation to lunch was clearly not coming off. She proffered a conciliatory hand "I haven't offended you — have I — dear Mrs. Challoner? It's so often the only thanks one gets. But I always say a duty's a duty

— you know what I mean? And of course *you* don't hear things. But you can trust me . . .”

“Oh, yes. You're always so kind. But really — if you don't want to get caught . . .”

She detached herself, at last, and stood watching, with impassive face, the firmly controlled figure in tussore coat and skirt, bustling down the drive. Then she went in, discarded her hat, and settled herself in the sun by the long drawing-room windows, to wait for her lonely tiffin.

It was the last Sunday in June. The delayed monsoon hung heavy in the air. The heat was oppressive, even in Gulmarg. Mosquitoes and sand-flies flourished exceedingly. But worse inflictions awaited her. As a recipe for the dimmest depths of depression, Edyth knew nothing to equal a hill station in the Rains. And Gulmarg had an evil name. India could do nothing reasonably and temperately — like her dear England. It was a land of superlatives and extremes: and her mainly negative nature rejected superlatives and extremes.

She was alone because Mrs. Leigh had a picnic on, in the Ferozepore Nullah, a lovely side-valley two thousand feet down — where the frivolous flirted and the serious fished for snow trout. They had all gone, Ian and Eve and Miss Minton, and, of course, Mrs. Vane — probably invited as Ian's pair, if Mrs. Chamier's insinuations meant anything. They usually paired at these picnics. And to pair a man with his wife was against the unwritten law. She herself had accepted — and shirked going. She had already earned a reputation for that unforgiveable sin: yet, if people left off asking her, she would feel unreasonably aggrieved.

It was very beautiful down there — the rushing stream and the meadow and the flowers; but the heat made her lazy and she was afraid of a thunderstorm; also a bad mosquito-bite had swelled her lip rather unbecomingly — though Ian declared no one would notice it who did not know the line of her lips by heart, like himself. It was quite a pretty speech — from Ian. She rather liked that sort of thing. Hensley excelled at it. Though he had induced her to use his first name, she had not responded in kind. It might be indiscreet; and Ian had old-fashioned ideas. Yet he

had made friends with Mrs. Vane — the forward, Bohemian type that she could not abide. He seemed different lately, in many little ways. Picnics had never been in his line. And why must they always choose Sunday — even a nice woman like Mrs. Leigh? She saw it as sheer perversity, in a place full of idle men, though, in truth, her own disapproval had become a shade less pronounced. It was mainly laziness and the mosquito-bite that had deterred her from going; but she bestowed all the credit on her conscience — that most accommodating and hardly used function of the soul. She had done her best to keep Eve and Miss Minton at home: but Ian would not hear of it. He was most unwise over the child.

Thoroughly annoyed with him, she had washed her hands of the whole thing; had put on a deeply bordered veil and gone to church hugging her grievance. She had prayed and praised automatically, with her thoughts elsewhere, and had come away feeling further aggrieved because her virtuous effort had not seemed to do her any good. It had merely flung her into the arms of Mrs. Chamier — with disconcerting results.

She had seen Major Borden hovering outside The Chummery. But for Mrs. Chamier she felt sure he would have joined her. He was not very interesting or intellectual; but she liked being singled out. And if pairing was the fashion, why should she discourage him?

So cunningly Nature works in us, that already her conformable mind was unconsciously taking colour from her environment, while her surface self still enjoyed the sustaining sense of disapproval.

Quite definitely, she disapproved of Gulmarg gossiping about Ian and that cocksure, conceited Mrs. Vane. She would never have believed it of him. And surely a woman ought to know her own husband, after twenty years? But Ian was the most unget-at-able of men. She had never really understood him. It almost amounted to a grievance. For all her surface culture, she was vexatiously aware of heights and depths in him beyond her reach; and nowadays he seemed more than ever withdrawn into those hidden regions to which she had no key.

A lurking suspicion that Mrs. Vane had discovered it galled her even more than Mrs. Chamier's insinuations. Her possessive instinct resented the intrusion. To that extent she occasionally felt jealous. The idea of emotional disturbance never occurred to her: so serenely convinced was she that his odd, inexpressive way of loving her was the most he could achieve in that line. Nor would she be likely, unprompted, to connect him with anything so 'improper.' Only sometimes, when they walked round and round the garden, or sat on in the verandah, talking and talking, it set her wondering what on earth they found to talk about; roused a certain dog-in-the-manger element in her. If *she* could not get at his mind and thoughts, no one else should . . .

That blue-black cloud was bulging over the pines, stealthily blotting out the sky. A sizzle of lightning darted across it — and the thunder crackled viciously. Then — down came the rain; hissing and stabbing and clattering on the roof like hailstones.

Some sinister connection between lightning and glass impelled her to move away from that vast expanse of window; and the sound of an arrival drew her into the hall.

There — to her surprise and pleasure — she found Major Borden, breathless from his hurried entrance, pulling off wet kid gloves.

"Saw you goin' back from church," he said, shaking hands effusively. "Thought you were at Mrs. Leigh's show."

"I ought to be. But I didn't feel up to it — fortunately!" She indicated the rain-lashed porch.

"Luck all round!" said he, dusting water drops from his Sunday coat. He was a solid man of middle height, swayed between secret concern for his figure and frank love of good living. "I'd have been here sooner, only I got wrecked on Mrs. Sham. They say the tongue is a little member, but hers is a mighty long 'un!"

"Well, now you're here, you *must* stay for tiffin and keep me company."

His pleasure was tinged with surface embarrassment. "Very kind of you. I didn't mean — turnin' up so late."

"That was Mrs. Chamier's fault!" she excused him graciously.

"There's the gong. We shall have them all coming back like drowned rats — poor things!"

They came back earlier than she expected — Ian, Eve, and Mrs. Vane — more nearly drowned than the stock phrase implied.

They found her and Major Borden established by the long windows again, the storm having settled into mere rain. Miss Minton had been left behind with the others, who had taken shelter in a Gujar's hut. But Eve and Mrs. Vane, it appeared, had actually been in the water, so Ian had hurried them home.

They had been fishing, he told Edyth; Mrs. Vane on the bank, the child on a jutting rock, he himself farther upstream. Eve, excited over a catch, had lost her footing. Mrs. Vane had promptly waded in; but, between Eve and the stream, she was knocked over, and hit her shoulder against the rock. They were both safe and dripping on the bank before he could reach them.

"Quick work!" His glance appraised Mrs. Vane.

"Quite a creditable catch!" She laughed, in the airy manner that Edyth labelled affectation. "Look at it. A water-nymph!"

Eve might have passed for one — Edyth had to admit — with her cheeks rain-washed and glowing, her eyes alight, her dark hair hanging in 'rats' tails' under the white *shikari* helmet, her wet skirt clinging to her figure, all her young slenderness revealed.

Ian held her by the arm. She had evidently given him a fright. His tone was abrupt — almost impatient — a sure sign; and his manner of greeting Major Borden told Edyth she would hear more of it afterwards.

At present, he was only concerned for his pair of drowned rats. He issued peremptory orders. For Eve a steaming mustard bath, a good rub-down, and a hot drink. For Mrs. Vane —

"I'm all right," she assured him. "My burberry riding-suit is proof even against an impromptu bath! I can quite well go on home . . ."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," he said (ordering her about, too). "Chris won't be back yet. Stay and have tea; and we'll doctor that shoulder. The sooner you get out of those things the

better. While they're drying . . . Edyth'll fix you up. Some sort of quilted tea-gown affair . . ."

His glance at his wife had the effect of faintly stiffening her manner. He was making too much fuss about the whole thing.

"If you'll come to my room," she murmured politely — while Eve skipped off to obey orders and Major Borden stood apart, feeling overlooked and anxious to be out of it. He privately regarded the Resident as 'a bit of a curmudgeon with a swelled head.'

Challoner should have attended to him, but, knowing his Edyth, he followed the women into the square hall; and, while Mrs. Vane went on to the bedroom, he secured his wife's arm, holding her back — so that, momentarily, they were alone.

"Do play up and be decent to her, Edyth," he said in low, imperative tones. "I couldn't pile it on, out there. But I suppose you realise, if she hadn't gone in as quick as winking . . . anything might have happened . . . to Eve."

Edyth stood rebuked. "No, I didn't quite realise," she tacitly excused herself. "Of course, she's welcome . . . I'll do what I can. Eve's so impetuous. It was very lucky . . ."

"Very plucky would be truer — and more gracious on your part." He looked full at her, one of his straight, disconcerting looks. "I'm sorry we interrupted the tête-à-tête. You might have told me . . . instead of laying it on the mosquito."

Her slow flush disarmed him. "But it wasn't — he wasn't — He turned up and it was pouring wet —"

"My dear, I beg your pardon," he said, in quite another tone. "The fellow has a pretty knack of turning up by accident on purpose . . ."

"Well, why not? He's very pleasant. I suppose *I* can have a friend . . . like other people."

"Quite coming on!" he chaffed her with a quizzical look. "You can have half a dozen, if they amuse you — of the right *jāt*."

"*I* find him all right — if he isn't very clever. I don't criticise . . . *your* friends."

"Oh — don't you? — But be nice to her to-day, please. No more glacial airs."

He turned away quickly, annoyed at his own carelessness. That 'her' was an egregious slip. But Edyth had probably not noticed. She had no gift that way.

Then he went out to dispose of Borden — politely, of course; since the fellow happened to suit her taste.

And Edyth, having noticed nothing, followed her guest, feeling better pleased with Ian and distinctly better pleased with herself. She had made a stand for her not very exciting friend; and his prompt apology pleased her. He had been more moody and irritable since he came up. Down in Srinagar things had been peaceful and happy. Now they seemed always to be clashing about nothing. But still . . . he was so fair, in little ways like that, when his sarcastic mood was off. He said he was not feeling well; and he didn't look it; and Eve really had frightened him. It *was* a mercy . . . They ought to feel grateful to Mrs. Vane.

Edyth found her already transformed; looking vexatiously nice in her own blue quilted gown, which her ayah had produced in her absence. Her friendlier feeling was not easy to express. Mrs. Vane, she had found, could be quite pleasant, yet keep you half a mile off. She stood there, at the glass, lifting her hair with a hat-pin, powdering her nose, as cool as you please.

And Edyth Challoner could not know how hotly, all the while, her pride and passion rebelled against having to be in his wife's room and wear his wife's gown . . .

"Thank you so much, I'm sorry to be trespassing," she said, with the tilt of her chin that made Edyth call her conceited. "I hope Colonel Challoner's changing, too. Eve gave him a fright."

"Yes. It was very lucky . . . so good of you," Edyth began lamely; but Vanessa laughed it off.

"Oh, nonsense! I'm thankful the darling wasn't hurt."

She moved towards the door.

"They've lit a fire in the drawing-room," Edyth said — feeling she could do no more. "I must attend to the wet things."

She did not hurry over them. Ian would soon be available. Then she looked in on Eve — bad child — luxuriating in her mustard bath.

When she came down, Major Borden was gone. The sun had

flashed out; and those two were evidently settled in the drawing-room, by the long windows. She caught a whiff of Ian's cigar — forbidden in there — and heard his deep voice talking, talking . . .

She had no wish to join them. There was a fire in the big square hall, too — it had turned chilly. She sat down by it and picked up "The Coming Era." But her mind kept wandering to the two in there. What were they doing in the silences? What was he saying, when the murmur began again?

Any other day she would have browsed peacefully on her favourite paper without a thought of them. It was all Mrs. Chandler's fault. For curiosity, once awakened, drills into the mind like a boring beetle into wood; and behind curiosity lurked her possessive instinct, always on the alert. It was clear, even to her, that Ian admired Mrs. Vane. And it was not like him. He had never been attracted by women. Perhaps, while he was alone . . .?

The tentative suspicion shamed her, who had left him alone. But, with a woman like Mrs. Vane, you never knew . . .

Decidedly Edyth's knowledge of the type was negligible; and it is through the gaps left by ignorance that the devil enters in. She could so nearly hear what they said that it tantalised her. She caught only snatches. Their voices were pitched so low. Why . . .?

She wanted to hear. She wanted to see. After all, if people were saying things, she had a right to know . . .

Just inside the drawing-room door, behind the screen near the piano, one would hear better.

The idea of eavesdropping was distasteful to her dignity; rather than to her conscience. It was unladylike. Ian would be furious if he ever suspected . . . But she had a pretty talent, at a pinch, for persuading herself that the desired was also the expedient.

Looking back afterwards, she could not remember making up her mind. She was there, behind the screen, hardly daring to breathe; feeling very uncomfortable, half ashamed, expecting — she hardly knew what.

They seemed to be discussing some book he had lately read; something about personality and philosophy. Not knowing even

the name of the book, she could not follow their arguments or their allusions. Mrs. Vane sounded rather animated, and Ian rather quizzical and caustic. They might almost have been a pair of men. She soon felt woefully bored; and was on the point of retreating, when Mrs. Vane sneezed — and Ian's manner changed at once.

"Now you've caught a cold. Are you feeling chilly?" His tone was abrupt, but concerned.

She laughed — that soft, fascinating laugh of hers. "Chilled to the bone! But I refuse to swallow mustard and water! I never get colds. The ungodly come in no misfortune like other folk."

"Don't talk cheap cynicism to me. I thought you'd dropped that attitude."

Edyth was interested now; and pleased that he spoke out straight about her affectations.

"Attitude?" (She sounded annoyed.)

"Pose, if you prefer it."

"I never pose. Of course, I've sometimes had to *act* — what I'm not — for dear life. I feel insulted."

"Sorry — I didn't mean it so."

"Oh — I'm making allowances. You've been badly jumped to-day."

"Horridly — you and the child."

She said nothing, and presently he remarked: "How's the shoulder? Never do to have it painful on the third."

At that point, the scrape of a chair startled Edyth. He might be getting up. To be caught out would be the last ignominy!

Stepping hurriedly backward, she knocked against a slip of a table by the wall. A small brass bowl, on a collapsible wooden stand, toppled over with a soft thud, onto the floor. She had just enough presence of mind to snatch it up and replace it — not on its stand; to hurry through the hall into the porch, where she could be innocently looking at the weather, if he chanced to hear anything and come out.

Safe for the moment, she leaned against the woodwork, her pulses hammering, feeling thoroughly ashamed of herself and proportionately angry with Mrs. Chamier, the indirect cause of her backsliding.

He had heard. He came into the hall. She kept very still, but inevitably he saw her.

"Did one of the servants come through just now?" he asked.

"No. Why?"

"Thought I heard one of them behind the screen. Something dropped."

"Did it?" She was surprised at her own coolness. "I haven't seen anyone."

"That's queer. I distinctly heard someone. Aren't you coming along in?"

"Not yet. You know I don't like cigars in there."

"Sorry." He twinkled. "I was religiously standing by the verandah door! I can chuck it away."

"Nonsense. I'll come later for tea. I've a letter to finish."

He was gone. She let out a breath of relief. It was more than she deserved. She had virtually lied to him; but what else, on earth, could she do?

She heard him go into the smoking-room. That beast of a bowl! Dreading his return, she moved right to the edge of the porch — very much interested in the clearing sky.

Light steps sounded in the hall. That was Eve: and of course Ian tackled her, too. What made him so suspicious?

Standing just outside, she heard all they said.

"Hullo, Pussykins! Did you look into the drawing-room just now?"

"When?"

"Three minutes ago."

"No. It must have been Mummy. She came out just as I went through into the dining-room, to get my book."

"Oh — that's all right."

Shame and trepidation pricked like needles in her veins. Had he suspected her, for all her coolness? What would he do? What would he say . . . ?

At the moment he only said: "Hope you feel dry again — and properly ashamed of yourself. Come in and give us some music."

When they were gone, she went back and sat on the couch in

the hall, tingling all over with the supreme shame of the discovered. Her lapse from grace seemed a trivial thing beside the knowledge that he knew.

In that flaming moment, she laid every ounce of blame on Mrs. Chamier — and the wretched mosquito-bite. But for her lip, she would probably have gone with them all and escaped Mrs. Sham . . .

When she joined them at tea-time, Ian gave her one look that set her tingling again. Her eyes slipped away from it, very much occupied with the tea-things.

Beyond that look — even when Mrs. Vane had gone — he betrayed no sign of anything amiss.

In a surface sense, she was relieved. In a deeper sense, the feeling that he knew — and possibly despised her too much even to speak of it — was a sharper castigation by far.

Gradually, her acute discomfort subsided. But, in both, the hidden knowledge, decently ignored, acted as an irritant fatal to the most difficult and delicate relation on earth.

Mrs. Chamier's inextinguishable zeal to 'help' had overleaped itself, and brought down the wrong quarry. The woman she obliquely struck at — the woman she could not forgive for robbing her of Chris — was the only one of the three who remained untouched — unaware.

CHAPTER THREE

*What I do,
And what I dream, include thee, as the wine
Must taste of its own grapes.*

E. B. BROWNING

ON the night of July the third, all Gulmarg was gathered together at Nedou's Hotel for the long-promised concert that Vanessa had lived and worked for, ever since the coming of Thea Leigh. The jarred shoulder was still painful; but, by dint of persuading Thea and Kaye to replace her in two earlier items, she felt fairly confident of carrying through her Tone Poem, "Gangabal" — the crowning point of a strenuous programme.

British India is nowhere more gregarious than in her hill stations. To the mixed human elements of Gulmarg, a concert was a concert. Whether or no they approved of Mrs. Vane, whether they could appreciate her music, as music, they had unanimously flocked to hear her and Mrs. Leigh and a sprinkling of vocal interludes.

Mrs. Chamier, very much in evidence — especially as to the nippers and the chin — preferred the vocal interludes, and hoped people would not make the world's fuss over Mrs. Vane. The woman's conceit was unbounded. In the interests of propriety and Residential prestige, she sincerely hoped she had made things clear to Mrs. Challoner. But Mrs. Vane had arrived with the Residency party all the same.

There were twelve of them, occupying the front row. To Challoner that was one of the inevitable drawbacks of his exalted position. It thrust him everywhere, metaphorically or actually, into the front row. Mercifully, Edyth appeared to enjoy it; and any mild enjoyment she could achieve, out here, gave him genuine satisfaction. On the whole, she seemed to favour Kashmir — especially the Srinagar house and garden — perhaps the most delightful of their kind in all India. Up here she was less contented; but she had never cared for the Hills — except as convenient fire-

escapes. Mountains meant little more to her than steep paths and *khuds* and alarming thunderstorms. To him, as to the pious Hindu, they were abodes of Deity — God made manifest in Nature.

To-night — if execution matched inspiration — it was to be a case of mountains manifested in music — and such mountains: the high and pure region of Haramokh and Gangabal. A daring theme for a comparative novice in composition; but, given the divine impetus of genius, the boldest flights will often carry farthest.

He had not heard a note of it; had purposely avoided the subject. But to-night, before starting, when they had a moment alone in the porch, Vanessa had said half shyly: "Won't you wish me luck?"

In the same low tone he had wished her luck — with all his heart. Then, for the first time, she spoke of her theme.

"Knowing it, loving it, as you do, you will be my severest critic. Please remember, it's not meant to be mere programme music. I've tried to recapture the spirit of place, that's all."

The others had joined them. He had not been able to answer — in words.

With the instinct of a true artist, she had reserved it for the end. And they were nearing the end now. The whole concert had been a spirited affair; a personal triumph for both women. Mrs. Vane's imitation of the bagpipes — the swing of the kilt faintly suggested as she paced the stage — had been a gallant performance, encored to the echo. People were plainly enjoying themselves; wrought to a responsive mood, in which she could work her will on them.

They had reached the last item but one. Kaye — accompanied by Thea Leigh — was in good voice this evening. Mrs. Vane had already left her seat between Eve and Thorne. When Kaye's encore was ended, she would appear.

Ian intended to listen critically; to hold his own against the enchantment of her and her magic wand. If he failed — to her be the triumph. He had been bracing himself for the ordeal these many weeks. But by no amount of taking thought can a man get

even with the critical moment. It will infallibly launch the attack from some unexpected angle, at a point where the defences are weakest, the inner garrison least prepared.

He had shielded himself from the well-meant infliction of talk or comment by securing the outer chair of the row, opposite the short flight of steps leading to the stage — with Eve for his neighbour, and Mrs. Vane sitting just beyond. There was balm in the child's presence, her fingers insinuated under his elbow; the jaded concert-room atmosphere freshened by the scent of a rose she wore in her sash.

She was exalted beyond loquacity. This was the event of her life: her first 'real live' dinner party, with Kaye for her partner — and 'Sminny as pleased as Punch because Captain Eden had come up. And now, a real live concert, sitting in Daddy's pocket all the time. She mustn't talk; and there was no need. He just tightened his elbow, or she secretly squeezed his arm over bits they specially liked.

Kaye's encore was over; applause was dying down. Involuntarily Challoner shut his eyes, as it were closing up the ranks.

When he opened them — she was there, in her shimmering gold-coloured dress with glints of green showing through, her arms bare almost to the shoulder. No barbaric futility marred the natural sweep of her hair. She wore no ornament in it except her wonderful Chinese comb. He noticed that she tucked an extra silk handkerchief under her velvet square; and prayed she was not in pain.

They were greeting her with vigorous applause and she was frankly smiling at Eve. For a second, she shifted her glance from the child, and their eyes met. It was as if he had touched an electric wire.

Then the music began . . .

Arpeggio chords on the piano — little more than a long-drawn, melodious breath of sound — released his mental tension, drew him unresisting into the heart of peace.

Vanessa waited, still as a statue: eyes veiled, her bow poised above the strings.

Then, almost imperceptibly it caressed them; and out of that

murmurous prelude rose a wandering melody clear as a jet of water in sunlight, the very spirit of dawn moving on the face of the mountains: a thing of infinite lightness and cleanliness, hardly touching the ground.

Then the piano took it up, enlarging and enriching it, while the strings wove into the melody hints and fragments of bird calls, only to be caught by a practised ear. It was no mere scenic effect, as she said; but to Challoner, knowing his Gangabal, it set clear before him lake and mountain and glacier, the sheeted gold of marsh buttercups, the peculiar startled brightness of snow peaks at dawn.

Up to that point, he succeeded, more or less, in listening with detached critical appreciation.

In the next movement her *tempo* quickened. A scurrying shiver on the strings, an undercurrent of soft chromatic octaves, suggested sharp little gusts of wind ruffling the quiet waters, the flutter of ghostly wings — of lost souls seeking rest and finding none. The eeriness of it, the sense of impending crisis, so intimately stirred him that even the illusion of detachment was dispelled. While the music lasted, she had him at her mercy, to play upon as she played on the magical instrument that was opening all her private doors to him — while the devil whispered a jeering reminder that he must never pass beyond the threshold.

Now the fierce rhythm of those scurrying gusts swelled to a climax of storm; piano and violin cunningly mingled; the clash and discord of a heart at war with itself, mirrored in the elemental conflict of the heavens . . .

Without a pause to break the spell, the surge and flux of that disturbing second movement subsided into the third — Adagio, changing to Largo on muted strings, for the violin alone, as the splendours of sunset faded and the profound hush of evening imbued earth and sky, and the still waters of Gangabal. Here and there the attentive ear caught a hint of birds at evensong, larks dropping to their nests . . .

The whole movement was haunted by a limpid melody, a peace out of pain — as if the free spirit, loosed from its moorings, were lifted on the wings of music beyond the confines of earth, beyond the uttermost stars . . .

In all the crowded concert-room there was not a stir, not a sound. Involuntarily Challoner closed his eyes, heedless of his surroundings. While the spell of her music drew him back, in spirit, to the shores of Gangabal; to that critical moment when she had sat there on the rock — a dim, magnetic presence, cloaked and hooded; when he had stood not an arm's length from her — and hardly knew, afterwards, how he had managed to withhold his hand.

And, all in a moment, the spell was shattered by a fearsome discord. Jerked back to reality, he knew it instantly for the cry of the eagle that had so perturbed her: a daring stroke.

He opened his eyes with a start; saw Edyth's gloved hand go up to her ear; saw a change come over Mrs. Vane, a tightening of her lips that perturbed him.

Eve, leaning close, breathed a whisper: "Daddy, something's hurting Vinessa."

And he thought: "Good God — her shoulder!"

"It's the music, darling," he whispered back. Why hurt the child as well?

"Isn't it lovely? Isn't *she* lovely?"

He tightened his elbow, enjoining silence; his whole attention shifted from the music to the player — if one could admit any vital distinction between them.

Her lips looked more natural now. But some inner strain was telling on her. Could he only by an effort of thought send her strength to pull through . . .

The haunting melody was dying to its close, running like a thread of gold through the murmurous arpeggios of the prelude.

It ceased. For the space of a heartbeat — silence: then her bow drawn shudderingly across the low string — and again he heard in fancy the far, ominous rumble of an avalanche —

Simultaneously he saw her whiten to the lips — knew she would fall . . .

For the first time in his life, impulse swept him to instinctive action. Almost before the strings ceased vibrating, he was up the steps, and on the stage beside her.

As Mrs. Leigh rose quickly, she swayed, tried to smile —

dropped her violin with a crash . . . and only his arm round her shoulders saved her . . .

Kaye — who had been nearly as swift — picked up the violin; and Challoner was just sufficiently himself again to feel thankful the boy had followed suit.

With Mrs. Leigh's help, he got her away.

"Brandy, old boy," he commanded Kaye, across his shoulder, as they went: and Kaye — who was feeling superfluous — revived at the request.

The initial storm of applause had subsided into murmurs of anxiety and admiration. As he ran down the steps, Major Thorne loomed in his path.

"How goes it?" he asked gruffly.

"Her shoulder, I think. I'm after brandy."

Eve clutched his arm. He nodded assurance to her — and Chris, whose eyes were demanding it. Then he fled to the refreshment table, in the farther room, where Mrs. Leigh, Mrs. Vane, and Miss Chamier were to be 'At Home' — afterwards.

Behind the scenes, they had taken Vanessa, between them, to an old deck-chair. It was Thea who found a cushion and held it in place, while Challoner lowered her onto it with infinite care: his arms a shade less steady than he could have wished.

One of them was still under her shoulder when she sighed, shivered, and opened her eyes.

"*You?*" For one unguarded instant she looked deep into his eyes — deeper than she knew.

His arm stirred under her shoulder — and her lids dropped. But her secret was out.

"It was superb," he said in a fervent undertone; determined to tell her before he slipped back into his shyness and his shell, with that staggering realisation superadded to fetter his tongue.

"Your shoulder?" he asked, in his natural voice.

"Yes. And — the whole thing. Too stupid of me. Thea was splendid."

He straightened himself, bracing his shoulders; while Thea knelt beside her, proffering lavender salts, and pressing her hand.

"*It was* a shame — but you pulled it off," she said, shrewdly

divining the truth and veiling it with easy talk. "It was the greatest *Moment Musical* of my life."

Kaye had returned with brandy-and-soda, overjoyed to find her smiling and restored.

"We've bouquets for you both," he said, "when you can face the other music."

"I'll be all right soon. Please tell them —" She appealed to Challoner.

And he must stand behind the footlights and talk of her to all those upturned faces — Edyth's included! It was the finishing touch.

"Very well," he said — and went to do her bidding. The world flowed in on them again — their incredible interlude was ended.

The concert-hall had emptied itself. In the room beyond, a crowd of the privileged jostled and talked and sipped coffee and crystallised into groups; the men drifting automatically to their own end of the table.

It was the kind of a gathering Challoner detested, and Edyth thoroughly enjoyed. For her, the music had been a prolonged — and occasionally tiresome — prelude to this. He knew it — and watched her, with a detached, indulgent amusement, graciously accepting Borden's assiduities in the matter of coffee and sandwiches.

Were he free to follow his own bent, he would have gone straight home and carried Eve off with him. But in a throng like this, he was not Ian Challoner; he was Resident of Kashmir — the most important person present, he reminded himself dryly. He needed the reminder. He still found his official dignity hard to believe in, harder to take seriously. At all events, his Residency, having gratuitously made himself conspicuous, could not pile folly on folly by making a bolt of it.

He looked across at Mrs. Vane — where the two women stood together at the receipt of congratulations and kind enquiries. She still looked white and unsteady, with her arm slung in a silk handkerchief to ease the shoulder. They ought to make her sit down; but she would refuse, if he knew her. Eve, at her elbow,

holding her bouquet, was patently in the seventh heaven. He himself had cut the flowers for those bouquets: blue for Mrs. Leigh; yellow and orange for her. Did she guess it, he wondered, as he made his interrupted way towards the region of iced pegs.

It was Edyth who interrupted, at that moment, her hand on his arm. (She had gone on with Borden while he loitered with a group of men.)

"Ian, you *did* startle me. Was she really bad? What was it?"

"Her shoulder," he said. "She gave it a bad knock, you remember — that Sunday."

He intended no covert reminder, but her lids flickered nervously. "Oh, that —? I thought that was only a bruise," she murmured — and took refuge in her coffee-cup, as he moved on.

For the twentieth time he wondered, 'What the devil possessed her — that afternoon?' He had been within an ace of speaking out, while amazement and anger prevailed. But he shrank from a heated discussion on that theme. Though scarcely a word passed between him and Mrs. Vane that all Gulmarg might not overhear — and welcome — his inviolable secret weakened his case against Edyth, in the court of his own conscience. But the thing stuck in his mind — an insoluble irritant . . .

Mrs. Chamier's emphatic voice — confidential but penetrating — caught his ear in passing.

"Yes . . . but still . . . you know what I mean? Could it have happened *quite* so neatly to anyone else on earth but our theatrical V. V.?" A pause, laden with significance. "I didn't know the Resident had it in him to be so nippy."

Poisonous woman! Of course, she would trundle round Gulmarg insinuating — and half withdrawing the insinuation — that the thing had been faked, for effect. If she talked that way to Edyth — enlightenment flashed . . .

In his wrath, he could have emptied his coveted iced peg, without compunction, down her discreetly unveiled back.

But when it came, he drank it at a draught. He had been feeling quite chippy. Mrs. Vane had shaken him up badly to-night. She still looked a deal too shaky herself. And there was that con-

founded woman 'eating her salt' and scattering seeds of kindness among her guests . . . !

He was glad to annex Colonel Leigh, Resident of Jeypore — up on a month's leave: a thoughtful, knowledgeable man, even shyer than himself. How he had ever succeeded in capturing that brilliant vital creature — Sir Theo Desmond's daughter — was a standing puzzle to all who knew him. Challoner liked the man better every time they met; and they talked Native States contentedly in a quiet corner, till the crowd thinned, and Kaye arrived with a message from Edyth.

She was tired. She thought Eve had been up late enough: did he feel inclined to come home with them?

"Inclined?" Challoner chuckled. "I should say so."

Leigh had moved away to find his wife. No one else was standing near them.

"What are *you* doing?" he added, with a significant look.

"We're walking home with them — Thorne and I."

"That's all right. As you've come here, I take it . . . you intend to fix things up . . . eh?"

Kaye looked shy and studied the cone of ash at the end of his cigar. "Oh, rather — I hope so. But, you see, she's got this notion . . . And to-night — you don't know how difficult . . ."

His lame attempt at explanation was wrecked on more than a suspicion that the dear old Colonel *did* know . . . He looked sad to-night; even sadder when he smiled.

"Difficult — 'm — not impossible," he said quietly. "They don't amount to much, either of 'em — as excuses. According to some sage — whose name escapes me — the only difference is that the impossible takes a little more time! Strikes me, your time's up. You're a lucky devil. She's a rare fine girl. Come along — or they'll be thinking we're conspirators."

Halfway across the room, Vanessa saw them standing . . . saw them coming. He had not been near her, nor said a word, since she came down from the stage with her bouquet and took possession of Eve. Their little reception — for all the compliments, the friendly talk and laughter — seemed an affair of impertinent trivialities; a drop from the heights after the nervous strain of

playing her "Gangabal" for the first time . . . to him; the thrill of that hushed hall intent on her every note; the tussle with her excruciating shoulder — and that crowning unbelievable moment when her senses returned and she found herself almost in his arms.

The transition to earth had been a shade too abrupt. It was foolish to feel neglected: more, it was wrong-minded . . . But had she ever been right-minded, in all her precarious, ill-regulated life? Naturally, he never sought her out in public. But he might have come and talked to Thea. He liked Thea, and she had hoped . . .

As the evening passed, and he did not come, she had felt half afraid . . . Had her eyes, in that unguarded moment, been fatally eloquent? Would one flash of the truth prove her undoing . . .?

He was coming, at last, with Kaye. But would he speak of her music, even now? Those three words, however exalting, were not enough. The insatiable artist in her demanded more detailed appreciation.

When he joined them, the talk was general. He spoke of the whole thing as an unqualified success. But she had done more than play; she had created . . .

Just at the last came a moment of comparative apartness. No one but Eve near enough to matter. It was now or never.

"I don't yet feel sure if I've satisfied my severest critic," she rallied him with a valiant effort at lightness. "Did I get the effect? Did it sound — like real music?"

For the first time since their amazing moment, he looked her full in the eyes.

"It sounded," he said, "like — Gangabal."

CHAPTER FOUR

*Since all that I can ever do for thee
Is to do nothing; this my prayer must be,
That thou mayst never know, nor ever see
The all-endured that nothing done costs me.*

LORD LYTTON

Hour after hour, that night, it rained and rained and rained, with the desolate, leaden persistence of rain in the mountains, when the yearly floodgates are opened and the Himalayas are obliterated by the Great Monsoon.

Hour after hour, Challoner lay and listened; eyes closed, arms crossed behind his head; his brain haunted with heavenly melodies; his ears assailed with the sad, tuneless patter of rain upon the roof, the swish of it against his half-open windows, the ceaseless drip, drip of it from drenched eaves.

Here, at Gulmarg, he slept alone. Coming up later than the others, he had secured a separate room on the plea that Edyth had spread herself pretty freely over the larger one — and why should he inconvenience her? He had flung out the casual suggestion, half in joke, more than half prepared for refusal. But Edyth enjoyed spreading herself; and she was far less nervous in Kashmir. If he preferred it, these few months, he was quite welcome. He would be able to sleep with his windows open and his curtains flung back, which she could not abide.

Her consent had been a distinct relief. To-night it amounted to a Godsend. For mere wakefulness was aggravated by a sense of impending crisis; the very crisis he had willed to avoid.

Down there, at Srinagar, the illusion of a rare and felicitous friendship had sufficed — very nearly — after vain attempts at readjustment in Peshawur. For a time it had seemed good enough simply to see and hear her, to enjoy the free interchange of ideas, to express without constraint his inner whimsicalities, his deeper perplexities and convictions. Since these had never been in any way associated with Edyth, the finer shades of disloy-

alty involved had not insinuated themselves between him and his passing content. The fact that she tacitly accepted the position, though half disliking Mrs. Vane, had made things fatally easier all round.

For Mrs. Vane, herself, he had barely recognised a risk. As among his fellows in Peshawur, so with this one woman — who had enkindled his whole being, at the meridian of manhood — he was singularly unaware of the impression he produced. He saw himself as dry, caustic, intelligent, but inexpressive; not the sort of man with whom any woman would be likely to fall in love — least of all one of her rare quality. He sometimes doubted whether Edyth herself had gone to any such lengths. Moreover, there was Thorne . . .

For himself — ardently desiring a sense of security, in a relation peculiarly satisfying to his temperament — he had almost succeeded in believing himself secure.

It had been the veriest folly on his part — at his age, with a woman like that. Though movement may be imperceptible, no human relation can remain static: and for all his self-discipline, the love, that could never blossom above ground, had grown inward and downward, thrusting strong roots into the depths of him — he who had counted himself master of his passions. Like Canute the Dane, he had said, in effect, to the rising tide, "Here shall thy proud waves be stayed." And the rising tide had paid as little heed to one as the other . . .

To-night, the magic of her music — that called up a too clear vision of Gangabal — had renewed the volcanic emotions with which it was indissolubly linked. No doubt the disturbing effect would pass. It was one of the advantages of middle age, that one could recognise that, even while it wrought in one's veins and cheated one of sleep and cruelly complicated the whole tangled situation.

For him there was more in this affair of being in love with one woman and living in the intimacy of marriage with another — loved temperately, up to a point — than the simple-seeming duty of honouring one's pledge. It implied — living in a lie: or at best in a tissue of minor insincerities, galling to his own self-respect.

and damnably unfair on Edyth. Yet precisely for her sake — and the children's — the play must be played out to the best of his power.

Mercifully, she suspected nothing nor would be likely to — if that accursed Mrs. Sham would let her alone. It had been one of the disconcerting discoveries of early days that she simply did not see things: that was all there was to it. And, in the present case, she would probably prefer correct dissimulation to the incorrect verities — which settled the matter.

Damn that downpour. Would it never stop?

The pattering drops seemed to beat upon his exposed brain —
Wearied out, at long last, he fell into a fitful sleep . . .

He woke before dawn with a vague under-sense of discomfort. Then he remembered.

The rain had ceased. His long window framed a strip of garden and of purple-grey sky, fading to a colourless pallor; a silver star or two, drifts of cloud, like wood-smoke; and in the far corner, thin and clear above the tree-tops, the inverted sickle of the old moon.

The beauty of it caught his breath. People who sealed themselves up with curtains never surprised Nature, unawares, in those secret moments of transition that excel the more obvious glories of sunset and dawn.

Sparrows and finches were twittering tunelessly.

He was out of bed, now, standing at the open window, sniffing luxuriously — damp moss and fern and drenched pine needles.

Then he slipped rapidly into his clothes, Larry watching his movements with a cocked ear and expectant eye.

Out there, from the summer-house, one might catch Nanga Parbat unawares, before clouds rolled up and extinguished her.

As the orthodox believer turns to prayer when the complexities of life are too much with him, so Challoner turned instinctively to Nature — 'spirit in her clods, footway to the God of gods.' There was no conscious gesture of thought or sentiment in his attitude. It was an impulse of the whole man, as natural as breathing.

Across the silvery white of the lawn he strode, with Larry on his leash, lest he waken the sleepers; and so to the summer-house — his sanctuary.

The half-awakened garden was fragrant of moist earth and roses. From tree to tree, birds flitted and dipped and called softly. Already, above the eastern peaks the sky was brightening to dawn. Faint colour flushed the wood-smoke films and the ragged edges of a grey transparency that hovered and darkened to a tumbled mass of rain-cloud, blurred and black, as if it had been rubbed in with charcoal.

And there — clear of cloud, and of mists that veiled the valley — Nanga Parbat soared, sublime in isolation; key of that mysterious *massif*, the roof of the world. No single peak in the wide horizon came within nine thousand feet of her ghostly summit; the ghostlier for a blue-white haze all her own — as it were a heavenly mirage rather than a mountain; a vision that more than justified her local name — Deomir, 'Home of the Gods.'

Challoner sat on, in the stillness of pure contemplation, letting that heavenly mirage flood sense and spirit as light and colour flooded the sky — till the first ray lit her summit, 'between a blush and a flame' . . .

When earth intruded again, it did not surprise him to find that he had reached a decision, which might ease things, for the moment, all round. He would return to Srinagar for a few days — nominally on business. His brief absence might mitigate the effect of — last night.

Up here, there was greater need of circumspection, with idle eyes watching and idle tongues chattering. A clear case for discretion, rather than valour.

But, although he could manage to keep away from her, could put half of Kashmir Valley between their actual bodies, there were times when his heart and spirit defied him, when he seemed able to reach her through some sixth sense, sharper than sight or touch. There was danger — insidious, yet real — in these curious moments of intensified consciousness. Their spiritual quality was less easily combated than fervours of the heart and the blood. Down there, alone, they would have him at a disad-

vantage. But go he must — and be more than ever cautious on his return.

As for her — the look that had so startled and shaken him had passed in such a flash that, by now, he hardly believed in it. She had barely regained consciousness. The exaltation of her music was fresh upon her. He would be worse than a fool to dwell on it, or exaggerate its significance. Ten to one, it was the artist, not the woman, who had so regarded him.

No doubt he was the readier to see it so because instinctively he clung to the one permissible relation. Mutual knowledge would shiver that exquisite illusion; it would set their feet on the precarious edge of things — between the step backward to orthodox safety and the step forward — into what . . . ?

Edyth complicated matters, inevitably, by taking the news of his sudden departure as a personal grievance. The rain was coming down again, with desolating persistence; her spirits were at zero. The damp had spoilt her best pair of gloves; mildew was growing in her shoes. Gulmarg in the rains was detestable, “too depressing for words.” Why on earth must he go rushing off like this, upsetting her engagements? Surely the business could wait?

And in his heart he knew perfectly well that his business — such as it was — could wait till September without serious inconvenience; but that which was driving him from her would wait no human convenience — hers, or his own.

He could only coax and chaff her back into a better humour; promise her two pairs of new gloves, promise not to get land-slipped going down and not to stay longer than three days, business or no.

On the whole he succeeded better than usual. The sky cleared before he left; and a burst of sunshine had its magically cheering effect.

“Well, if you *will* go rushing off like this,” she rallied him, at parting, “I must fall back on Major Borden for company! And *you* can’t make a fuss.”

It was casually spoken; but he could not take it casually — in fairness to her.

"That depends," he said. "You're welcome to Borden's company, my dear — if it doesn't spell boredom! So long as you give 'Smiddy her cavalier, too. Or have a little party, if you like. But no tête-à-tête-ing, Edyth. It's not faddiness on my part. Borden's the sort . . . who would misunderstand" — his straight look enlightened her — "and that would give you a jar."

She flushed slowly, twisting her rings. If her blinkers had their uses, they also had their dangers. "Ian, how perfectly horrid! I'm sure — you exaggerate."

"I don't. I wouldn't worry you for nothing. It's my business to safeguard you." And at once the bitter thought intruded, "Wish to God I could safeguard myself as easily."

"Thank you, dear," she said on a changed note. "I'll be careful."

In the warmth of his parting kiss there was no taint of insincerity, because there was no passion — only affection wrought to intensity by the secret pang of self-reproach. And for him, there was about it a queer sense of finality, almost as if a voice said within him, "That's over."

In a sense, he hated leaving her, if she had even trivial need of him, for all the increasing discord between them. But it was primarily on her account that he must fight the beasts at Ephesus. And he must fight them in his own way.

CHAPTER FIVE

Be the moon, the moon: my love I'll place beside it.

What is she? — Her human self — no lower word will serve.

BROWNING

MUSIC — at once the most primeval and most spiritual of the arts — works on the imagination with a more mysterious potency than any stirring sequence of colour or phrase. More than any other art, it is the wind of the spirit, blowing where it listeth: and the breeze of Vanessa's music, on that crucial evening, had stirred lightly sleeping memories and emotions — not in Ian Challoner's mind alone.

On Kaye, its effect had been decisive. That vivid reminder of Gangabal — of the beauty and the suffering, and the flicker of a new hope, so strangely mingled — had wrought his emotional complexities to a point at which he must imperatively solve them there and then; must imperatively convince Chris that — for all Vanessa still swayed the artist in him and the boy — the allegiance of his heart and his manhood were hers for the taking; that they would be hers more deeply, more unfailingly, with every year of marriage. It was a point gained that, at last, he felt able to speak frankly of his feeling for Mrs. Vane — even to analyse it, to see why and how it persisted, why it need no longer stand in his way.

Walking home beside Chris, after the concert — in the fitful brightness of a moon now obscured, now emerging triumphant — these thoughts so urgently beset him that he said in his heart, 'I'm worse than a fool if I don't pull it off to-night.' While the fervour was on him, he could make her listen, make her believe . . .

At the first moment of meeting Mrs. Vane, he had been shaken — perceptibly. Chris had seen: he knew she had seen: and till the effect of that passed, it was not the remotest use speaking. To-day things had been easier. Mrs. Vane was backing him for all she was worth. And now — ?

He looked down at the small, resolute figure beside him. Her pale satin cloak, cunningly draped, gave her strength and sturdiness almost an effect of grace. Bareheaded she was, disdainful of a futile scarf. Her red-brown hair, black in the moonlight, had the effect of a quaint ruffed-out headgear, intensifying the whiteness of her face and neck. Her eyes were mysterious pools of shadow; the blunt, decisive tip of her nose and chin enchantingly clear against the dark, and between them the closed lips, softly obdurate. A girl like that . . . he positively did not deserve his luck!

She was quieter than usual — like himself. Had the music wrought upon her, too — carried her back to Gangabal? So still she was, on the surface; such a volcanic creature inside: you could tell that by her hair and her temper. And the way she could hold herself in! She would have a man on her own terms, or go without . . .

Her silence and her nearness — after four months' abstinence — stirred him to a pitch of fervour he had never attained in Peshawur; emboldened him, suddenly, to capture the hand swinging loose at her side.

"Chris, don't be angry," he said, quick and low. "I must speak. Don't push me off any more."

"I'm not — pushing you off. I couldn't. But —"

She spoke barely above a whisper, her moon-white face lifted to his.

"Let me come in, then, to-night. And — try to understand."

"I *am* trying — all the time."

"May I come in, then?"

"Yes."

He crushed her fingers so that she winced. But he said no more. They were nearly there.

When they arrived, Thorne also showed signs of wishing to come in. To-night he had suspected, for the first time, who it was that stood in his way; and, if any suspicion could sharpen the pang of his own failure, it was that. He had never yet asked her if there were anyone else. He wanted to ask her now, in the forlorn hope that he might be mistaken.

But Vanessa, to-night, was a being withdrawn into the sanc-

tuary of her own indicable experience. Outside that, she was concerned for nothing — save Chris and Kaye.

To their mutual relief, she disposed of poor Major Thorne with her unflinching ease and skill that had yet no trace of unkindness. And when they were alone together — they three — in the little lamplit sitting-room, she wasted no time on futilities.

“If you’ll keep me company, Kaye, I’m going to fortify myself with a strong peg. Then — bed. It’s all I’m fit for. And you two have things to say to one another. Or if you haven’t — by this time — you both deserve I should give you a sound shaking!”

Chris slipped an arm round her, and kissed her cheek. “It’s lucky for you, and your threats, we aren’t eligible for the shaking. You couldn’t deliver the goods — tied up in that handkerchief! Is it hurting still?”

“Not worth mentioning. It doesn’t deserve kind enquiries, after doing its damndest to spoil my ‘Gangabal.’ Now, then, Kaye —”

He filled her glass; and she lifted it, looking from one to the other.

When it was empty, she held out her hand. “Good-night. Don’t be scandalously late.”

Having secured him, she deftly freed her left arm, captured a hand of Chris, and deliberately linked them between both her own.

“Let’s be frank about it. I’ve been the stumbling-block — quite against my will. Give me, to-night, the credit and the pleasure of knowing I’ve helped to remove it. Then my fiddle won’t have spoken in vain.”

Without staying for an answer, she left them standing there, hands linked, in a rapture of embarrassment.

Kaye’s fingers tightened. “Chris — *do* you believe in me now? I’m loving you to distraction — wanting you. *She* knows. So *you* ought to know.” He looked down at the hand Vanessa had bestowed on him. “She’s given me a bit of you. But I won’t take all of you from anyone — but your precious, obstinate self.”

This time he looked into her eyes. His gaze on her deepened

and darkened. And impulsively she leaned to him, as at Peshawur, her head against his arm.

"Kaye — darling." Her voice had its deep, purring note. "It's *me* that's been the fool, these two days. Take me — hold me — don't *let* me be an idiot any more."

He needed no second bidding. He took her and held her . . . and she clung to him, in whole-hearted surrender; yielding, as large natures yield, without measure or stint . . .

"Don't go — yet," she murmured, as he half released her. There would be other moments, differing, like the stars, in glory; but her woman's instinct told her that none of them would have quite the same pristine quality of freshness, of miracle . . . She had never played at love, nor encouraged men to play at it. And, to-night, she had her reward.

"When you want me to go, you can turn me out," he said, a new deep note in his voice that made her lean close again.

"Oh, at that rate, Vanessa might find us sitting here with the early tea-tray!"

"She's welcome to!"

Without more ado, he sat down and drew her onto his knee, ignoring her faint remonstrance, pressing her head against his. And while his fingers strayed in the lion's mane of her hair, he enlarged persuasively on the common fallacy that it is impossible to love two people at once.

"You see — the truth is, most of us *are* two people at once — some of us three or four. So two loves *can* exist together — in some natures. Though, of course, they can't be felt together."

Chris chuckled irreverently without troubling to lift her head. "Is that what you call metaphysics?"

"It's what I call human nature — the noblest study of mankind . . . !"

"Well, there's plenty of human nature about me. But I jolly well know that if *I* tried it on — there'd be internal combustion!"

He caught her closer. "Of course, there would — you dear darling. You're made all of a piece. I'm a collection of odd pieces — partly thanks to my amazing mother. I remember she said to me once, about herself: 'The main trouble with me has been

that people *will* treat me as one individual, when I'm really half a dozen."

"O-oh! If it's as bad as that with you — I'll be losing my way among them!" She shifted her head so as to get the feel of his cheek against her temple.

"Not quite so bad. I only run to two or three!"

"Well, if I can utterly and surely have *two* of you — I'll allow Vanessa to have the three-th — I can't say fairer!"

It was his lips against her temple now. "Christabel! You're the sanest, sweetest thing in women that ever I imagined. Mother will love you no end."

"Don't be too sure. Mothers often hate them!"

"But I *am* sure — because of — Mrs. Vane —"

"Oh, call her Vanessa — and be done with it. Why — because of her?"

"She's so curiously like Mother, in lots of little ways. Even the Colonel has noticed it. I think that's partly why — a bit of me must always go on loving her."

"Then, she can have that bit. It's very noble of me. But she's so lone. And it's *too* tragic — her and the Colonel!"

They talked for a little of her and the Colonel; shamelessly consigning Mrs. Challoner to a lethal chamber. Though they did not know it — and the knowledge would have dismayed them — the shadow of potential tragedy threw their own radiant moment into brighter relief.

Suddenly — after one of their impassioned silences — Kaye said: "Darling — engaged people *have* a way of getting married. What are we going to do about it? Here am I, with three months' leave. Why should we waste the good days — waiting?"

She stirred in his arms. "*I* don't want any more of that."

"Very well, then . . . ! I've written about you to Mother. We'll cable the news and pull it off as soon as you can fix up . . . your clothes."

"Clothes!" There were foolish tears in her eyes. It was too unbelievably delicious — the swift rush of it, after months and months of dragging uncertainty. "I've just enough to stand up in, thanks very much!"

“Oh, but I mean — if you want a show. I’m game . . .”

“Well, I’m *not!*” She sat upright and shook her mane at him with decision. “They’re nothing to me — these people. I’ve got you; and I don’t want any old show . . .”

He let out such an immense sigh that she laughed, her deep, gurgling laugh; took his head between her hands with a gesture adorably maternal and laid her cheek against his hair.

“Eight in the morning for choice, please. Just you and I and Vanessa — *and* the Colonel, who must be coaxed into giving me away; Uncle Ned being mercifully out of reach! And then — ? *What d’you think?*”

He turned on her his glacier-blue eyes, full of tenderness and humour and something more — that she had not seen there, till to-night.

“I haven’t succeeded in thinking beyond — that.”

“Well, I have. We’ll go straight off — and climb to the top of Haramokh — because fairyland lies up there! How’s that, for a Lenox honeymoon?” (She knew all about his father by now.)

His illumined face and the grip of his arms told her how unerringly she had hit the mark.

“Can you guess . . . *when* I thought of that?”

“*When?*”

A blush crept into her cheeks. “I can’t look you in the face and tell you.”

“My shoulder’s handy,” he suggested.

And, with her face hidden, she told him — pausing between the words that he might grasp the full enormity of her ‘previousness’: “Just about — this time — last year.”

CHAPTER SIX

*God can create new things; but has even He the power
to create afresh that which has been destroyed.*

RABINDRANATH TAGORE

THROUGHOUT that particular week of July, the Great Monsoon exceeded even the records of Gulmarg. Day and night, with leaden persistence, the floods descended on the open glade, on huts and tents that leaked like sieves, on carefully tended golf-greens and armies of ghostly pines.

As the surging mists shifted, these loomed and vanished and loomed again, their dark branches down-drooping, spirits of melancholy incarnate. When the veil thinned, for an hour or two, the sheen of an incipient lake showed where the polo ground was not. The links suggested an obstacle race: and the ubiquitous, fussy little stream — a treasure-house of lost golf-balls — was swollen to a muddy torrent. All the hills were musical with waterfalls. Now and again the dull roar of a landslide sounded, like muffled drums, through the swirl of the heavenly orchestra.

Around and above that handful of stray human beings, in their drowned huts and tents, Nature towered implacable in her overwhelming manifestations; hurled her cloud armies one upon another, crashed her titanic cymbals in thunder and torrent and avalanche, let loose the flowing garment of her mists, till all her world of mountains was blotted out.

But neither thunder nor deluge nor blanketing mists had power to dim the light that lighted Chris and Kaye in those early days of their engagement. Chris, content at last, radiated a profound and quiet joyousness, a visible blossoming of the whole woman, like a fruit tree in spring. Impervious to 'record' rainfalls and landslides, they basked in the sun of their own happiness; and the sight of it assuaged, a little, Vanessa's ache of perplexity and disappointment, when Kaye brought word from the Residency — the morning after the concert — that the Colonel had gone off to Srinagar on business, and would be away some days.

Instinctively the thought sprang — what manner of business, with the Maharaja himself at Gulmarg? And they two had arranged for a round of golf that very afternoon. What did it mean? Had one unguarded look between them driven him away? That disturbing doubt emphasised cruelly the apartness of his life from hers. For all their intimacy, he could rush off like that, at a moment's notice, and she had no right to ask — no right to know. The pain of it cut deep.

Meantime, she made a brave show of concentrating on her Kashmir journal, now definitely in preparation for a publisher at Home: consoling herself, betweenwhiles, with Eve's lessons and Thea Leigh.

As for Edyth Challoner — to her the floods and blanketing mists of those three days seemed the finishing touch in India's long catalogue of sins.

Till now, Kashmir had pleased her, on the whole. There was a sustaining pride in Ian, and in the deference paid to her as his wife. If only the craze for India were not so ingrained in him! If only she could still hope to lure him away when the Kashmir time was over!

She loved the Srinagar Residency, the placid softness of lake and river scenery; the garden, where she had sat for hours, in those wonderful spring days, browsing on the newest books, discreetly chosen by Hensley himself. She had loved her motor launch and the outings on the lake, the serene beauty of the old Moghul pleasure grounds. She could even admire the eternal snows — from a respectful distance.

But the very charm of it all had a two-edged quality. It reminded her too poignantly of Home. And, as summer drew on, the pain of that whispered reminder awoke a distracting suspicion that perhaps Ian had been right about Tony, after all. Here was Mrs. Leigh, with her small boy. Watching them together made her heart ache beyond bearing. And if the boy did look rather thin, he seemed well and full of vigour. She had talked to Mrs. Leigh about it. Was there any sense in sacrificing one's happiness to an exaggerated idea? Perhaps . . . next year . . . ? But every atom of delay made it more unwise.

They were in the Bungalow again now — Carl and Tony, waiting for the others. That glorious summer was not repeating itself: but there it all was — Home and children and the sea. No majesty of mountains, no charm of garden, lake, or valley, could rival for her the simple delights of their motor picnics, of bathing and lazing with the children on her familiar sands.

Mail letters arrived the day Ian left. Tony was not well: some trifling ailment; but she was in the mood to magnify trifles. And, in the course of those few fatal days, they assailed her with the malicious persistence of mosquitoes.

There were squabbles in the compound; the new under-*khit* was impertinent, infected with modern ideas. He 'forgot' to salaam, unless he was pulled up about it. The *khit* reported rats in the fowl run, carrying away the eggs. How could one be *sure* it was rats, in this country of liars? In the monsoon, snakes and centipedes added a new terror to life. Yesterday evening she had found a centipede in her shoe. It had scuttled over her hand; made her scream like a fool, in front of the ayah.

In some mysterious way things always went wrong, if Ian was not there. His one brief note told her the deluge was even worse in Srinagar; he might be delayed in getting back.

Her own little dinner had not been very enlivening. Worse than all, in spite of Ian's warning, there *had* been an undesigned tête-à-tête with Major Borden — and he *had* given her a jar.

He had turned up at tea-time when Eve and Miss Minton were over at the hotel. He had stayed and stayed, talking about England, his manner rather more intimate than usual. And precisely because Ian had spoken, her own manner had been a shade less assured.

Then, somehow, his arm along the sofa had slipped — and it was round her waist. She had sprung up and confronted him — so angry and flustered that she hardly knew, now, what she had said.

Of course, he had been full of apology; vowed he intended no insult: she had been so kind: men were such lonely devils in India — and so on. He had begged her to forgive him; and, oddly enough, she had half complied; adding, with commendable pro-

priety, that unless he behaved himself they could not go on being friends.

Her correctness hinted that the little episode should have made her dislike him. Instead, it had made him seem rather more interesting. There was even a secret excitement about it that involved no feeling for the man himself. She had decided not to tell Ian. He would be sarcastic about it; possibly angry, if she refused to drop Major Borden. And, after all, it was partly his fault, for going away — which, in some inverted fashion, seemed to justify her reticence.

At any rate, *she* did not get herself talked about, as he did. She knew people had 'said things' after the concert; and she was sensitive to comments of that kind. If he took her to task over her friend, why should not she do likewise — diplomatically, in the maternal vein? The idea of jealousy was ridiculous, at their time of life.

After all, he was delayed till the fourth day, and he came back looking quite ill. He had slept badly, he said, owing to the heat. She was not feeling well, herself. The damp had given her neuralgia and rasped her throat, which rather deflected her concern from him. He had been looking ill for some time. But he was deadly obstinate about doctors. One could only hope it might be nothing serious.

That — for a while — had been Challoner's own attitude. But down there he had been pestered with intermittent headache and nausea. His digestion seemed all out of gear; very unusual, for him. He ascribed it to the damp heat of the valley; and he had skilfully avoided Norman. But sensations at the end of his journey made him doubt if he would be able to avoid Saunders for many days longer.

Emotionally he had rallied his forces — more or less; had decided that he must cultivate Edyth a little more ostentatiously, for the benefit of Gulmarg. He must also, by some means, contrive to see less of Mrs. Vane. It would need to be tactfully done. She must not be hurt; and, above all, she must not misunderstand.

The deuce of it was he and Edyth seemed lately to have dropped into a habit of friction — aggravated, no doubt, by her secret craving for Home and his secret struggle with his own heart. However amicably they started a conversation, she would sooner or later strike the personal note, precipitate discord, or an open quarrel. He seemed caught in a vicious circle. His nerves reacted on his temper; and resulting friction frayed his nerves, making his honest bid for loyalty to her seem, at times, an ironic futility.

On the evening of his arrival, peace prevailed till dinner-time. She seemed really pleased to have him back — if only as a safety-valve for her grievances against the servants and the weather. But the frail bark of their amity was wrecked upon Eve and her bedtime.

The child was in a state of repressed excitement over his return; with the added thrill of a dinner party the day after tomorrow, to celebrate Kaye's birthday and his engagement. She was to play her 'Nocturne,' with Vanessa, for the first time 'in public.' He himself had heard it more than once — and his surprise had been genuine enough to satisfy the pair of them.

To-night she was sitting up an extra half-hour in his honour. When the bad moment came, she clung to him, pleaded for only ten minutes more.

Her mother objected — on principle. Challoner fatally suggested stretching a point, 'just once in a way': to which Edyth retorted sententiously that, since *he* came to Gulmarg, going to bed in time was 'once in a way' and sitting up to all hours the normal thing.

That flagrant overstatement had proved too much for Eve — at such a moment.

Her "Mummy, how *can* you exaggerate so?" had brought swift retribution.

She had been dismissed to bed, in tears. He had gone up later and sat with her; perfectly well aware that he should have ranged himself on the side of maternal authority. To do him justice, he rarely ran counter to it. But the child's greeting had so refreshed him, her tears had so sharply pained him; and Edyth had a way

of doing things — entirely right in themselves — that drove him automatically in the opposite direction.

His ten minutes with Eve had left her cheered and consoled; and with that grain of comfort he had salved his lacerated heart.

No rain had fallen on the day of his coming. And next morning the sun flashed out between billowing white masses of thunderous cloud. The marg had dried up astonishingly: and Edyth was cheered by the prospect of golf — if it lasted. Even a partial round would be better than nothing. They must be sporting and secure the Leighs.

Challoner felt utterly unfit for the exertion. But sooner than raise difficulties, he assented. He must begin as he intended to go on. So a *chit* went round to Nedou's Hotel. They would finish up at the Club where all Gulmarg assembled for drinks and friendly amenities. Probably — *she* would be there. She seldom played golf. Polo was her game: and a pretty player she was, too. But though polo was 'off,' she would certainly be at the Club; and a nervous dread of that first meeting was upon him. He would far rather wait till to-morrow evening. With a twinge of wry humour, he recalled his so different shirking of that first encounter at Kargil — and what came of it. This time he would not run away from Fate . . .

Shortly before lunch, an attack of giddiness and faintness assailed him. He said nothing till the meal was over, hoping the effect would pass off. It did not pass off. A round of golf would be lunacy. There was nothing for it but to back out gracefully — and take the consequences.

He told Edyth the truth. He had felt very queer before lunch; he was simply not up to a game. Annoyance at her own disappointment and his defection overshadowed the serious reason for his exasperating behaviour.

Of course, she was convinced it would do him good. And it was unfair on the Leighs.

He assured her they would understand. They could pick up a fourth man at the Club.

But she was not to be cheated of her grievance. "Oh, yes, of

course. Any scratch player. Besides, they were coming here to cut in. And we can't — without you."

It was one of his Residential privileges to 'cut in' at the hole nearest his own garden; and one of Edyth's pet grumbles that the privilege was not shared by her unless she played with him.

"I'm sorry," he said, unshaken by her plaint. "But if you go round early, you'll save them the trouble."

Her face hardened. "It doesn't matter to you that *I'm* not feeling up to much, and *I* want to cut in. Really, Ian, you don't seem any iller than you were at breakfast. I call it very inconsiderate —"

"Oh, damned inconsiderate!" His temper was slipping out of hand. (Couldn't she see that he was not himself?) "I'm feeling bad enough to take it lying down."

She glanced at him apprehensively; her grievance still paramount. "I hope you aren't really going to be ill. That would be the last straw. But if you *will* go rushing down into that muggy heat . . ."

He was silent: and a crazy suspicion fatally assailed her. "It's so sudden. I suppose . . . you haven't had an invitation — from Mrs. Vane?"

"Good God!" He stared blankly for a moment. Then, guessing her thought, his temper flared. "What the devil . . .? I haven't seen or heard of her, since . . . the concert. In any case I've a prejudice in favour of speaking the truth."

The anger in his eyes, the controlled pain in his voice, told even her that she had made an unforgivable slip; and her impromptu attempt to remedy it missed the mark.

"Well, it's not very surprising I should think so. She *does* make a dead set at you. Other people notice it, too."

"By which I presume you mean Mrs. Chamier — an unimpeachable authority." His still anger was at white heat now. "How you can demean yourself to repeat such a barefaced libel — to my face!"

She drew herself up, her own slow temper rising; her deep-laid plans for a tactful maternal warning scattered to the winds.

"It's not only Mrs. Chamier. Nearly everyone, but you, can see the *sort* of woman she is."

"Mrs. Leigh, for instance — and Chris," he flung out furiously.

His manner alarmed her a trifle. But injured dignity upheld her. "Oh, it's no good arguing with you. But in your position you *ought* to be careful. After all, I've as much right to warn you, as you had to warn me — about Major Borden!"

"Borden!" He checked himself; and added icily, "I fail to see the connection."

"Then you must be unusually dense."

"I've not the monopoly in that line," he retorted incisively, bringing the blood to her cheek.

Every moment their looks and tones grew more unguarded; their suppressed hostility rose nearer the surface.

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself — believing Mrs. Chamier's mean insinuations against a woman who has no one to fight her battles for her."

Again he checked himself. Anger had not quite obliterated wisdom.

"I'm sure she's quite capable of fighting them for herself. I know Mrs. Chamier exaggerates. But still . . ."

"You suspect me — or her of . . . God knows what? You de-mean yourself to spy upon us."

"Ian — how *dare* you!" In her wrath, she forgot the slip that seemed dead and buried.

"Well, what else d'you call it — slinking about, that Sunday, like a common eavesdropper?"

Her colour changed under his bluntness. Instinctively, she snatched at a straw.

"Really — if I mayn't move about my own house . . . ?"

The look he turned on her shrivelled her to silence.

"Hardly worth lying about it, Edyth. That's not the fact. And you know it."

"How do *you* know it?" she insanely flung out.

"By obvious inferences — and from what Eve said."

"Oh, of course — I forgot."

"You . . . ?"

"Yes, I heard — you and Eve."

"Good Lord! If I'd known that, I would have spoken at once."

His generosity shamed her; but she said nothing; and he went on: "I hope you were duly edified. Did you seriously imagine . . . ?" A fresh flame darted from his smouldering anger. "By the Lord, it would serve you right, after this, if I made you sit in the room with us, whenever she comes. Anyhow, please understand I need no warnings; nor do I propose to regulate my conduct by the exalted canons of Mrs. Chamier and her kind. I'm quite competent to safeguard the good name of any woman who honours me with her friendship . . ."

White and shaken, he sank sideways onto the nearest chair, his right hand gripping the back of it that she might not see how his fingers trembled.

His changed aspect alarmed her.

"Ian — what's the matter? Are you really bad?"

She ventured a hand on his shoulder. But a contained nature, once roused, is not to be lightly placated.

He jerked his shoulder away from her touch without looking at her.

"Never mind *me*. It'll pass off."

Contrite though she felt, and half afraid, she knew him well enough not to press even her contrition upon him, in that mood.

"If you're feeling so ill, you'd better go to bed and send for Dr. Saunders," was all she said — and left him sitting there in a rigid stillness, till her footsteps died away.

Then he pulled himself up, feeling dizzy and unstrung; moved across the room and lowered himself cautiously into his armchair. Thought and sensation were blurred. He hardly knew what he was doing, or what he had been saying.

His head fell back against the cushion. Consciousness almost slipped from him — not quite. He was aware, all the time, of his heart knocking unevenly against his ribs. It roused him. Realisation flooded his brain.

He had returned armed with high purpose; fortified with good resolves. And one outburst of temper had wrecked everything —

or nearly so. Meeting *her* again, after this, with Edyth's eyes on him — let alone the eyes of Gulmarg — would be a more formidable affair than ever . . .

For nearly an hour he lay quiescent, not even pretending to read. Unaccustomed sensations subsided. Ill as he felt, frowsting indoors was unbearable, with the heavens clear and the snows 'out of *purdah*' at last.

He shouted for tea; and ordered Shahzada.

A leisurely ride would involve no effort. For him the saddle was the finest armchair on earth. If his body were sick, his heart and spirit were in a worse case; and whatever else was denied him, there remained the eternal hills — their colossal passivity, their serene remoteness from man and his puny predicaments.

CHAPTER SEVEN

We, too, are dust of infinity.

RÉMY DE GOURMONT

VANESSA VANE, on that fateful afternoon, neither played golf nor strolled over to the Club.

She knew very well that Ian Challoner was back in Gulmarg; but her mind unconsciously worked with his — since both were lovers — in preferring to avoid a first encounter in public. She knew there had been talk — since the concert, if not earlier. For herself — she was case-hardened. But she resented it — for him.

Moreover, she knew him well enough, by now, to doubt whether he would be there. That doubt compelled her frankly to confront the tragic, yet uplifting, certainty that, at heart, he was very much more than her friend. Sub-consciously, she had known it these many weeks; had, for once, been culpably shutting her eyes to the truth. Though the dear delusion of his friendship was but a tithe of what she craved from him, it was 'the immediate jewel of her soul,' haloed with some touch of the ideal that she had needed and woefully missed in her haphazard, unharmonious life. Short of absolute necessity, she could not, would not let it go.

Their moment after the concert had been crucial; her eloquent look, the tremor of his hand under her shoulder. His abrupt departure — on business, in which she did not believe — was proof that he shared her recognition of danger. Now, with his return, a sense of impending crisis at once thrilled and troubled her . . .

In the early afternoon, mists and clouds rolled up again from the valley, only to be swirled along the Ferozepore Nullah and dissolved, in wreaths of foam, round the dripping cliffs of Kulan.

Half the lower greens were water-logged; yet, all over the marg, incurable players were out, like snails, after the rain.

Kaye and Chris had gone off for a tramp. Thankful as she was for that tardy consummation, their divine egoism *à deux*

aggravated her own bitterness of frustration. All human life is conditioned and circumscribed. Loneliness, it seemed, was to be her condition of being.

Shifting, billowing masses of cloud promised sunset effulgences that would flood the heavens after days of rain. A long walk would help to still her futile fervours and set her thoughts in order. Evensong of birds, far visions, and rain-washed skies might yield fragments of inspiration for the fresh musical theme that was moving in her brain.

In her burberry and close-fitting rainproof hat, of Gangabal days, she made for the Circular Road — the glory of Gulmarg ridge; a road that has few rivals in all India. From beneath and above it sprang lordly pines — two hundred feet and more — now screening, now darkly framing glimpses of the snow-line, or of the whole wide valley, aglow and a gleam in the light of early evening; the Jhelum River, a restless silver serpent, losing itself in the serene stillness of the Wular Lakes.

Everywhere the hills were laced with waterfalls, the valleys jewelled with rice-fields; and away beyond the golden roofs of Srinagar, wave on wave of hills — empurpled with rain — swept upward, to break in foam upon the summits of the Pir Panjal. Kolahoi and Haramokh lifted proud heads, newly whitened, wreathed in mist. Lighter fleeces veiled the main bulk of Nanga Parbat; and lifted above it, inconceivably high, her ultimate peak caught the sunlight. A god flashed greeting to a god.

Vanessa — filling her lungs with clean air, her eyes with light and colour — was suddenly smitten by the pang of contrast; the serenity and splendour of the hills; the hidden clash and discord of her own insignificant soul. Oh, God! — the futile, tragic waste it was for them both — of the only life, that she, at least, could feel certain of possessing. For once, she came near to envying good Christian folk, with all their after expectations cut and dried; strong, simple souls who could say, unhesitatingly, 'Get thee behind me, Satan,' in full assurance of their ultimate reward.

Throughout those early, embittering years of marriage, there had lurked, always, a dim hope that, some day, somehow, she would stray into Lob's wood and find her second chance. Now

it had come to her. But, like Tantalus, she could only look and long; could never possess the treasure she had won.

In those days, when she craved only her art, love — of the baser sort — had been thrust upon her. Now she craved love — art was given her. In that region, she knew herself on the threshold of bigger things. There had been promise in her lesser pieces for violin and piano. There was more than promise in her "Gan-gabal." She was musician enough to know that, without telling. And she would sacrifice her blossoming gift . . . almost without a pang, for the simple woman's right to marry Ian Challoner. That was life.

As matters stood — if he, too, were seriously involved — there remained only one service she could do for him — stand out of his way; leave Kashmir, which she had hoped to make her home, till a mythical Indian 'nation' pushed the British into the sea. It was a bitter decision; the hardest she had ever been called upon to make. The fact that she saw it as inevitable proved that the lever of what he was had wrought in her to some purpose.

She would not tell him to-morrow evening, and spoil Kaye's birthday. She would wait for their next quiet time alone together. And his manner of receiving her news would be the ultimate test — if that were needed, now.

There remained the minor vexatious consideration of ways and means.

On the whole, she had been lucky with her investments. Her jockey, Captain Fuller — one of the few good friends of her degenerate days — had done well, this year, with 'Con Amore,' at various race meetings and gymkhanas. She was able to leave her racing business mainly in his hands. But life, at Home, on her modest income — even with the fiddle to eke it out — would be a vexatiously restricted affair, after the noble spaciousness of Kashmir. And her passage money, alone, was a serious consideration. It were folly to sell 'Con Amore.' She must borrow. Somehow, it must be done.

It was characteristic of her that not once did she glance at the possibility of marrying Major Thorne — though the good man

had reiterated his more-than-willingness to be accepted on almost any terms . . .

The pop-plop of horse's hoofs behind her threatened an unwelcome intruder on her vast privacy. It might be no one in particular. Or it might be . . . ?

She stood still and looked round . . . and stood stiller than ever, all her pulses in a tumult.

There was no mistaking either horse or rider. But why did he ride like that — so slowly? The droop of his shoulders — as if in utter dejection or utter weariness — sharply contracted her heart. Impossible to bolt. And she had no desire to bolt. She had done her best to run away from him and — thank God — she had failed.

Was it possible . . . he had done the same? And it was all to no purpose. As with the Looking-Glass House, so with one's fate, the more zealously one walked in the opposite direction, the more infallibly one ran straight into its arms. She was no rank fatalist; but there are moments when reason itself is overpowered by a sense of larger forces working through the play and counterplay of human action.

He looked up; recognised her — and drew rein. For half a second, she feared that he intended to bolt — he looked so strange. The impression passed in a flash. He was smiling and lifting his hat. Then he rode on towards her.

She pulled off her gauntlet gloves — and stood silent, while he dismounted with a curious carefulness that pained her. But the very turbulence of her thoughts held her dumb. And he said not a word: simply held out his ungloved hand.

It closed on hers with a force that sent a thrill up her arm; closed on it and held it, as if he were in two minds about letting it go. His eyes, gravely smiling, looked straight into hers. For one perilous moment, as they stood so, she was prepared for almost anything to happen — as at Gangabal . . .

Then he relinquished her hand, and said, with a palpable effort: "You knew — I was back?"

"Yes. I knew." (Why did he ask that?) "You're looking positively ill. You ought not to have gone — state business or no."

He frowned at a pine branch beyond her shoulder. "I had to go. It was not pleasant down there. And I gather — it was not much better up here."

"Pleasant — no. But *I* rather enjoy seeing Nature thoroughly lose her temper."

"And man also?" A gleam of humour lightened his eyes. "Didn't you say — on a certain occasion — that you found curses refreshing?"

"Oh — then!" How *could* he remind her? He seemed to be considering her with his half smile — remembering . . .

"You look none the worse for Nature's curses," he remarked in a different voice. "How's the shoulder?"

They were themselves again; miles removed from their beautiful, tremulous moment.

"Better. Not quite friends with the fiddle yet. I shan't be inflicting another concert on you, at present!"

"What d'you mean by that?" he asked almost sharply. "That's not your line — getting the wrong end of the stick." He hoped his smothered vehemence would pass for mere annoyance. "You *know* I liked it . . . too well, the music, the whole thing — to make small talk about it."

"Oh, I *beg* your pardon." Colour flooded her face. "Somehow, I didn't feel sure — I ought to have known."

"I hoped — you did know."

He secured Shahzada's bridle and they moved forward together; Larry bounding on ahead.

And Vanessa walked beside him in a still content, looking neither before nor after — vividly aware of holding between her hands some lovely fragile thing that would shiver at a careless touch. She glanced at him sidelong. He had not spoken all his thought. If she kept quiet, more would come. It came.

"An experience . . . beauty — unearthly beauty like that," he said, in a low voice, looking straight before him, "soaks in too deep . . . to be dug up and handled. You artists can manage it . . . in your own medium. We ordinary mortals . . ." He hesitated.

"You ordinary mortals have the right feeling, to leave — cer-

tain things unexpressed?" she prompted him. His hesitation hurt her. "We artists are born without it — or we violate it? That's the main cleavage."

"For which the rest of us may be thankful. Art is self-expression, or it's nothing."

"In other words — it's an innate incapacity for the decencies of reserve!"

Her lightness had its challenging quality; and his frown was a contraction of pain.

"Why *will* you deliberately misunderstand me?"

"Deliberately?"

"I've too much respect for your artist's intuition to suppose otherwise. You must know. You do know — what I felt . . . what I thought of your amazing achievement . . . rendering and all. You women are insatiable. I told you . . . it was superb." His sudden direct look reminded her. "*Can* I say more?"

"Don't try to — please." He had given her what she craved — and it was almost more than she could bear. "Forgive me . . . for pressing you. But I had a reason. Rather an important one, for me. I wanted to feel sure you weren't disappointed, because . . . when it's published, I'm hoping very much you will let me dedicate it to I. K. C. Of course I'd like to add, 'In gratitude,' but that's understood between us."

He could not at once find words in which to answer her utterly unexpected request. And she, dreading refusal, found courage to add: "Don't disappoint me, please. I've set my heart on it. You see, it's all been — your doing. That's not modesty, it's the truth."

"With a good many grains of salt?"

"As many as you please, so long as you say 'Yes.' You know — Gangabal was your gift. *I* know — the rest. But I can't explain. Though I *am* an artist — of sorts, I have my reserves. So you must take it on trust."

"I take it — as a very great honour," he said; no lightness now, in his tone. "And since you care — all that for my opinion, such as it is, I would like you to know that your last movement remains with me as one of the loveliest things I have ever heard."

"O-oh!" Her sigh of pure pleasure was eloquent enough to satisfy even him: too eloquent for his peace of mind. Every moment her looks, her tones, confirmed the truth her eyes had told him — the truth he had tried so fruitlessly not to believe, not to see. With that knowledge quickening the blood in his veins, silence became the danger zone: speech, of any kind, safer than none.

"The last touch of all," he went on, resolved to give her the utmost that their distracting situation would permit. "That far-off rumble of the avalanche — was perfect. That you should think of it . . . !"

"I didn't *think* of it. It was there . . . the last touch . . . for me; the last thing I heard — that night."

"But then — that was . . ."

He pulled himself up in time.

And she answered very quietly:

"Yes — a second one. Somewhere about midnight."

To her unconscious admission that, in spirit, she had shared his vigil, he could find no answer, except in words he had no right to speak, nor she to hear. And she, it seemed, had no more to say. They were in the danger zone again; danger exquisitely sharpened, in his own case, by the knowledge that he stood at the half-open door of her heart. A word, a movement — and it would yield to his touch . . .

Yet they walked on side by side, in that radiant world of mountains, till the strain affected him physically. A quick-drawn breath made her scrutinise him with unconcealed anxiety.

"You're not fit. You oughtn't to be walking. Do please mount and ride back. I'll be all right alone. It's my normal state of being."

"Not while I am here to escort you," he said, with decision. "But it might be as well — to turn back —"

"Sit a few moments first," she commanded, alarmed at his aspect, yet afraid to say much. Already she feared she had given herself away.

The fact that he obeyed without comment proved him more shaken than even her eyes could discern.

Having tethered Shahzada, he chose a boulder near the path's edge, where he could lean against a tree. And as they sat there together — while clouds drifted and massed for the sunset splendours she had foreseen — one memory stole into the minds of both — Gangabal.

Challoner ventured a glance at her still profile. All the underlying hardness had been charmed away. The lips had a new tenderness; only at the corners a hint of strain. And he thought, in a passion of protest: 'By God! That was a two-edged gift of mine. But — if I know her, she wouldn't have it otherwise.'

And Vanessa — very woman, in her surrender to the moment — felt, rather than thought: 'He knows. He cares. He understands —'

To all outward appearance, they merely sat — a reasonable distance apart — and watched the sunset.

Vanessa knew very well that she ought to be telling him of her righteous resolve to leave Kashmir in September. But it would hurt him so. And he seemed so shaken. She had not the heart to shiver the surface peace of their God-given hour. The telling must wait for a less exalted, less critical moment.

Challoner — unaware of vital decisions — felt half afraid to look at her, lest, in spite of himself, he should turn and take her in his arms . . .

Thus detached, yet intimately at one, they sat on, while mists dissolved and all the heavens blossomed like a rose.

Away to the northwest, the sun, weirdly misshapen, was slipping through a tumbled mass of purple-grey cloud, breaking it into shreds and curded flakes where the light blazed through; staining peaks and snowfields with rosy light; opening up vast, clear furnaces of evening gold. And high above that burst of passionate splendour the sky was dappled with light-filled fleeces becalmed in the upper air.

Mists rolling up from the valley obliterated the lesser hills. Gold and crimson fragments drifted across domes and shining ledges. And throned above all, faint yet clear, Nanga Parbat lifted her sublime head and shoulders — an island of pearl, set in an ocean of light.

"Only she is of the Olympians — in the world, yet not of it," Challoner said, in a low tone, without looking round; so secure he felt in their unity of thought and feeling. "Even Haramokh and Kolahoi are of the earth, beside her. I have fallen a victim to many great peaks. But she, more than any of them, draws one like a magnet."

And the voice that drew him like a magnet echoed his unspoken thought: "'Oh, that I had the wings of a dove!' — You've never climbed her?"

"Not I. It would seem almost — a violation: which proves I'm no true mountaineer. I'm even fool enough to hope that Everest may baffle the record-breakers yet."

"How nice of you!" Their voices had a hushed quality, as if they were talking in church. "I'd rather be that kind of fool — in your company — than be wise among the record-breakers."

He considered, in silence, that moving remark. Then he reverted to Nanga Parbat: a safer theme.

"I'll tell you what I *have* done. I spent six weeks, one summer, walking round her, like any Hindu devotee — though I stopped short of measuring my length upon her sacred earth like a looper caterpillar!"

"*What* an idea!" She drew a great breath. "If only I could . . . ! I believe I will."

"Indeed, you won't!" His brief look set her vibrating. Then he turned away again, and said, in another voice: "Hard lines. That's the worst of being a woman. If only you — were a man . . . what a trip we could make of it!"

"If only . . ." She paused, musing on the condition. "No. In spite of disabilities, I'm enough of a woman not to appreciate . . . that kind of wish . . . from you."

"From me? How *could* I . . . ? To me — you're all of a woman." The words were out of themselves. No keeping clear of the danger zone — start where they would. Even Nanga Parbat was not distant enough, ethereal enough, for safety.

He blessed her for her silence; but he could run no more risks.

He rose and braced his shoulders. "Time we were moving on, I think," he said in his normal voice.

She rose also, simply not daring to speak.

For one precarious second they stood poised on that invisible edge of things that must not be overstepped. Independently, or by some flash of transition, there came to both the chilling thought — would they ever dare to meet alone again, like this . . . ?

Looking away from him, she caught sight of four people approaching round a distant bend. It was one way out, if she could venture to speak frankly.

“Wouldn’t it, perhaps, be better — as I said — for me to go on alone?” Her glance indicated the reason. “I’ve an idea Mrs. Sham has been rather industrious lately.”

“Confound the woman!” His smothered fury was sweeter to her than honey in the honeycomb. But it was not a theme they dared enlarge upon. He could only add, with an irrepressible touch of bitterness: “You’re safer, it seems, without my escort than with it. I’ll ride home, later.”

“Don’t stay too late, and get chilled,” she pleaded, feeling abysmally commonplace.

“Oh, I’m all right. — Thank you . . . for a wonderful walk.” He held out his hand. “To-morrow night?”

“To-morrow night,” she echoed. To her overwrought fancy the words had a fateful sound.

He crushed her hand with unguarded fervour, so that it tingled for many minutes afterwards — reminding her.

Tears were heavy on her lashes as she turned away — tears for the futile tragedy of it; their hearts so irrevocably joined, their lives so irrevocably sundered . . .

Once she turned and waved a hand to him when those four unconscious intruders had passed into a dip, and were hidden from view.

Then she herself passed out of sight; and he sat down feeling utterly, blankly alone — raging at the lame conclusion of their lovely and perilous hour.

Warnings forgotten or unheeded, he leaned forward, elbows on his knees, and covered his face; shutting out the heavenly radiance that held no balm for his terrible inner tumult.

Then a sudden, commanding impulse seized him to spring up and ride after her, to tell her . . . God knew what . . . and burn his boats once for all. He even sat upright and pressed his palms upon the rock; but a passing giddiness — the physical effort of rising — checked and calmed him.

“My God!” he groaned — and hid his face again.

For a long while he sat thus, stilled by the equal pull of tremendous forces in collision.

All his life’s training, all the traditions of his race, opposed the unbridling of bridled passions, the reckless breaking of bonds. But now — while the look of her, the touch of her, were paramount in him — she stood for the call that refuses to be denied; the call of spirit to spirit, including yet transcending the body’s need. His tormented heart, that was her advocate, argued plausibly — why not have the moral courage to admit failure, as regards Edyth; to tell her the truth and snap the frail thread that bound them; let her go back to her children and her Carl? Right or wrong, it would be more straightforward; kinder, surely, to her!

Yet another voice, deeper, if less urgent, queried — Was the thread so frail? Was it not a network of countless fibres, too closely inwoven for the clean cut that looked so simple in a moment of desperation?

What of the children? What of the potent fact that, for close on twenty years, Edyth had been his wife — inadequately loved, and none too adequately loving; yet, inalienably, his wife. And, for Challoner — as for most men with no strain of the libertine in their blood — those two words had almost the potency of a talisman. In his own case, ironically enough, the idea seemed more potent than the woman. Honestly, he did not believe she had any vital need of him. Honestly, he knew that, for Vanessa, the loss — even of his friendship — would involve suffering of which the other was sheerly incapable.

And there remained the disconcerting paradox that, although his whole relation with Edyth had become a living lie, the Church and the Law upheld it. With Vanessa he could live true truth — purged of falsification and suppressions: yet, in the eye of the

Church and the Law, they would be outside the pale. He was modern-minded enough to feel there was profanity in keeping up the convention of a union no longer sanctified by love, while yet he inherently respected the tenets of tradition and religion.

And, tradition apart, religion apart, there remained the curiously compelling power of marriage; its deep grip on life; the mechanical way in which it bears down resistance, always presupposing certain compunctions and scruples remain for it to work upon . . .

Again he sat upright, remembering her disregarded plea. He *had* stayed too long. He was chilled all through. The heavens and the snows were chilled also to the pallor of death. Mists, no longer opalescent, surged up from the valleys. Only the uttermost peak of Nanga Parbat gleamed coldly pure against the ghost of an afterglow.

Irresolution was ended . . .

His reluctance to move, to return, restless sounds of Shahzada shuffling behind him, woke a dim sense of having done it all before . . . somewhere . . .

Instantly it came to him . . . that strange hour of temptation on the Kardang Pass, little more than a year ago — the most significant year of his life.

Looking back on that unforgettable episode, he saw it as a symbol, of this more urgent and terrible temptation, which set him, once again, between the lure of the wild and the drag of the beaten track; between the urge of individual desire and the restraining force of collective tradition — the harsh yet inevitable decree that the single life must be crucified, here and there, for the safeguarding of the community.

And again, as on the Pass, the rocky elements in him had prevailed. Marriage, it seemed, had a sanctity of its own, apart from love. For better, for worse, he saw his pledge to Edyth as a pledge of honour — and honour would have the last word in his own despite.

Not without a tinge of bitterness he recalled his then shrewd suspicion that, at a pinch, Edyth would have it, always. He knew it now.

Yet, in the last resort, it was something stronger than Edyth, stronger and deeper even than the idea of marriage that prevailed against the rising tide of passion; it was a sovereign interdiction — the potent, felt, interior command. Call it the ingrained conscience of his race, or the voice of God in his own soul, it remains the deciding factor at moments of crisis. Sceptical and perplexed he still was, in the grain — ‘yet not unto despair.’ His moment of clear conviction on the Kardang Pass would remain with him always — an imperishable witness to That within in every soul which is more than a match for whatever it may be called upon to face.

He was aware of no exaltation: but, in that moment of serene, implicit victory, strength flowed in on him like a tidal wave . . .

He rose at last, feeling cramped and cold. A glance at his watch flung him out of the clouds almost as rudely as Shahzada’s stumble had flung him earthward on that morning of anti-climax. Unless he hurried unwisely, he would be late for dinner — he who had cried off golf on the entirely sincere plea of feeling too ill.

He had forgotten golf, forgotten their bitter altercation, forgotten everything in earth and heaven . . .

Now earth claimed him again. He would certainly be late for dinner. And Edyth would be very much annoyed: anti-climax, indeed!

CHAPTER EIGHT

*We build, with strength, the deep tower wall;
That shall be shattered — thus and thus . . .*

ALICE MEYNELL

HE was not quite so late as he feared. Edyth would have to let him off changing. He must make his peace with her, as best he could — and start afresh.

But the moment he set foot in the hall, his sharpened senses told him something had gone wrong.

The dining-room door was flung wide; lamplight glinted on glass and silver and the soup tureen — mutely reproaching him. On the sofa, near the fireplace, Miss Minton sat alone.

“Afraid I’m late,” he began — and was pulled up short by a look of nervous distress in her eyes.

“Anything the matter?” he asked kindly. She was a good little soul. “Where are the others?”

She stood up, small and unimpressive, surcharged with tidings that were beyond her province.

“Eve’s in bed. She seemed over-tired. And Mrs. Challoner —” Her correctness suddenly collapsed. “Oh, Colonel Challoner — *do* go to her. She’s had a wire from England — an accident, I think. She’s packing. She seems so strange — not like herself —”

Before she had half finished, Challoner was across the hall — his own illness, his tragic complications, brushed aside by those astounding words. Edyth packing . . . an accident? Tony . . . ? It could be nothing less.

In his perturbation he flung the door open impetuously. She gave a faint scream: and when he entered she stared at him wide-eyed, on the defensive, almost hostile. In her start of fear, she had backed against the wall; and she stood so, hands at her breast, her lids flushed, her eyes bright and hard.

The whole room was in amazing disarray: drawers pulled out,

cupboards gaping; her big trunk strapped and labelled, the bed strewn with hats and shoes.

"My dear!" he cried, "what's the matter? What does this mean?" He went quickly to her and put an arm round her; but she scarcely yielded to his touch. "Miss Minton said — an accident . . . ?"

"Yes — the car — Tony. I've been wired for. I *must* start at once — or I shall miss the mail."

Her manner had a strangeness — defensive, like her attitude — that checked his uprush of sympathy and concern.

"May I see the wire?" he asked, letting his arm fall away from her. "I'm naturally anxious —"

She picked it up from the dressing-table and handed it to him.

"It doesn't say much. They're horrid things."

He looked down at the thin slip of paper and read:

Motor accident. Carl's arm broken. Tony slight concussion.

BERYL

He let out a breath of relief, but bewilderment deepened.

"Really, Edyth," he protested, uncomfortably aware of his heart jumping about. "You gave me a bad fright. There's nothing serious in this. They've *not* wired for you."

"Of course not," she insanely contradicted her own statement.

"But you said . . . ?"

"Because I know. Poor Beryl! I'm sure she's not told me all. They wouldn't like to frighten me . . ."

His abrupt laugh sounded almost as strange to himself as to her. The grim humour of the whole situation too sharply smote him.

"People aren't so damned considerate as all that. If things had been serious, Miss Randal would have wired herself. Probably the child was in a funk, and did it on her own. You can do no earthly good — rushing off like this. Slight concussion's a matter of a few days, possibly a week. I didn't wire for you, when I had it last year. You won't be home for more than a fortnight . . ."

"No. That's the awful thing . . ."

It was as if she had not even heard his arguments.

"You'll get news out here. You'll get none on the ship."

"I shall! I'll arrange for wires — at the ports. I don't care about the cost. I've wired to the P. & O. I'm paying everything myself. So you needn't begin talking about expense."

"I'm *not* talking about expense," he countered furiously. Their innate antagonism was aflame again, darkening counsel, confusing the issue. "I'm talking of the madness of it — for yourself. You haven't a conception what the journey down is like in July. It's hell-fire — no less —"

She quailed perceptibly. "You're exaggerating — to frighten me."

"Not likely. I'm trying to bring you to your senses —"

"Well, you can save yourself the trouble. I'm *going*. If you'd been at home when I came back . . . ? The links were too wet. We had tea, and I hurried home — because of you. And I found — that wire. You *said* you were too ill to play golf; yet you could go off riding, for hours and hours . . ."

"I had to get out of the house," he excused himself desperately. "Sitting in the saddle was no effort — I went rather too far; and I simply wasn't up to cantering back."

Even in his wrath, the half truth galled him. At any rate, the last was true. She might see that for herself.

But she had eyes for nothing, just then, except the unlooked-for chance of escape from India — miraculously given her, and seized instinctively. That he had not been there to stop her was a part of the miracle; though she used it, unhesitatingly, as a rod to smite him, an argument to strengthen her case.

"That's all very well. Anyhow . . . you weren't here. So I made my own arrangements."

She turned away and began feverishly unrolling stockings, stuffing them into the toes of her shoes. For a second or two he stood staring at her, blankly incredulous, like a man in a dream: his head buzzing, his hands cold as ice. The whole thing — his own crisis, her hardness — seemed curiously unreal. Physical sensations heightened his irritability and blurred his brain. Again the strangeness of her tone and manner smote him — as if some-

thing long bottled up had found vent at last. She seemed more like some unknown changeling than the placid, dignified Edyth of all their married years.

Then — light dawned on him. Her nervous movements, her tacit dismissal of himself and his protests, woke suspicion of the truth. He was in no mood to mince matters, and he flung it at her bluntly as a stone.

“I’m a fool to waste words, I see. The rains have hipped you — made you homesick. That wire’s given you an excuse. You’re exaggerating everything for your own justification. The fact that I’m ill matters nothing to you — if Tony has an ache in his little finger.”

His indictment struck home. But the truth was the last thing she would admit. His opposition merely hardened her obstinate resolve.

“It’s *not* his little finger!” She swung round on him with shaking lips and hostile eyes. “It’s concussion. *You* don’t care —”

“I do care for the little chap — so far as I’ve had a chance. If it were serious — if you were really going on that account, you’d have all my sympathy; though it’s the last moment one would wish you to be travelling. I suppose I *was* a fool dragging you out here against your will. You’ve been out a bare six months — after six years at Home — and you’re bolting back on the first plausible pretext. I’m simply not fit for futile wrangling. And a man has his pride. But please understand . . . if you insist on going off like this, for no adequate reason — you go for *good*.”

Those words and the manner of their utterance penetrated the mental fog in which she had moved for the past few hours, refusing to think or to look in any direction but one.

She turned on him a slow gaze of blank unbelief. “Ian! How *can* you talk like that?”

“You’ve goaded me into it,” he answered, unmoved.

She remained incredulous — if faintly alarmed. “You don’t mean it. You’re only saying it to try and stop me.”

“I’ve not the smallest wish to stop you — now. I’m not the man to say a thing — like that — as a mere bit of bluster. Since you came out I’ve done every mortal thing I could for you. —

Evidently, it won't work. You stayed away too long. If you go now — it's on the clear condition that I shall *not* ask you to come back. Also" — a dread thought seized him — "you don't take Eve. I won't have her and Miss Minton subjected to that hideous journey."

This time she half believed him; but his last words raised immediate considerations. She had not given a thought to Eve. It would never do to admit that; and something in his manner goaded her to hit back at him, by arguing the point.

"What nonsense! Of course, Eve must come. If *I* can survive — she will. A child out here — without her mother! It's unheard of."

"Well, it's going to be heard of — once in a way. If you've booked their passages, I'll refund the money. But you don't take Eve away from me. That's final."

The cold inflexibility of his tone convinced her it was so: made her feel a fool for having opposed him at random. Yet how could she admit the ignominious truth?

He had turned to leave her — numbed, for the moment, in heart and body. But, automatically, his practical brain was thinking ahead. Her safety was still his first concern.

Near the door he halted and looked back at her, where she stood near the dressing-table, her feverish activity stilled by the amazing turn of events.

"You can't travel from here to Bombay without some sort of escort. Frankly . . . it's unsafe for an Englishwoman, in these days. Perhaps you've made some plan — as everything seems cut and dried?"

She had made no plan, but she answered coolly. "Well, of course, I thought — Shere Ali . . . ?"

"Oh —" (He had specially arranged for the transfer of his most trusted *peon*.) "Have you spoken to him?"

"Of course not."

"Very well. I'll see to it. — Aren't you coming down? It's late."

"No. I couldn't sit there and . . . Oh, there's too much to do," she lamely concluded. "I'll have a tray sent in."

"Very well." He was past even mild remonstrance, mild surprise: a blur of unreality was over it all.

Something in his toneless acquiescence made her look at his face with eyes that saw it too clearly for comfort.

"Ian," she said, more like herself than she had spoken yet, "you look such a queer colour. Are you *really* ill?"

"Lord, no — of course not. Don't let *me* stand in your way. I'm only chilled a bit — and wanting my dinner."

It was true: but, as he returned to the hall, the one thought in his mind was — Eve. And there on the couch sat Miss Minton — still patiently waiting for her cold soup.

She rose hopefully at his entrance. Some sort of explanation was her due.

"I'm extremely sorry," he said, "to keep you waiting like this; but Mrs. Challoner is very much upset. Not coming to dinner. Do start, please."

"Oh, really, I couldn't," she fluttered distressfully.

"I wish you would. I'll come in soon. I must see the child and tell her . . . she's not going to-morrow."

Miss Minton's evident surprise impelled him to add hurriedly: "We've decided the journey would be too much for her. Of course, if you'd rather . . . go Home . . . ?"

"Oh, no, that is — I mean — just what suits Mrs. Challoner. I naturally thought . . ." Her dutiful neutrality evaporated. "But, of course, if Eve isn't going . . . if I can be of any use, I'd much rather stay."

He smiled on her so strangely that she felt half frightened.

"You can be of the utmost use. I shall be very grateful. Please start — I won't be a minute. Eve can't be asleep."

She was not. She was huddled under the bedclothes, manfully trying to stifle her sobs. Not a word had been said; and Mummy had been so queer that she dared not ask. And Daddy never came back. Only he could save her . . .

At the sound of his step, she flung off the bedclothes.

"Eve — my darling," was all he said. He was kneeling by her pillow; her cool arms round his neck, her tears on his cheek; and his own slow tears overflowed in spite of himself.

"Daddy, don't *let* me go — don't let me!" she pleaded brokenly.

"Of course not, Pussykins," he assured her, stroking her hair. "You've got to stay and keep me company. I can't be left all alone."

She shivered with joy and clutched him tightly. "You and me — and Vinessa," she whispered. "How lovely!"

In reply to that embarrassing but so endearing remark, he could only kiss her fervently, settle her in and bid her be sound asleep when he next looked in on her.

So ill he felt, so dazed with mental strain, that it seemed to him, afterwards, as if only those few minutes of simple, natural emotion with the child had saved him from ignominious collapse.

By the time he joined the faithful 'Sminny at her lonely meal, he was sufficiently himself again, on the surface, to talk naturally about things in general; till the mild melodrama she had been assiduously weaving in her mind began to look a trifle premature. Not for the first time she decided that 'the Colonel,' in his more approachable moods, was one of the nicest men she had ever known. But it was all very puzzling, and very uncomfortable. On the whole, she preferred her romances in books; always excepting her own 'little affair' that looked sadly like ending in smoke.

After dinner her correctness — that had taken a brief holiday — revived to the extent of offering to go and help Mrs. Challoner.

"D'you think . . . could I be of any use?" she ventured, half hoping he would say No.

But he seemed pleased with her for suggesting it — though it was her duty, after all.

Challoner, left alone, had a painful sensation as of 'coming to' after being stunned by a fall. He seemed to have dropped miles since their quarrel after lunch. That quarrel — so trivial in its origin — had, as it were, loosened the first stone that precipitated the landslide . . .

Pulling himself together, he looked in at Eve. She was sound asleep. Then he settled himself in the study, with a pipe — and realisation flowed over him, wave on chilling wave . . .

In this one disastrous afternoon, he had lost the joy of a stim-

ulating friendship, had mastered, by God's mercy, the greatest temptation of his life — only to be goaded by Edyth into virtually shattering his marriage: only to find himself, by a sublime stroke of irony, left with his renunciation on his hands. The abstract morality of it was, at that moment, no compensation for his bitter sense of loss . . .

He fully intended to look in on Edyth, see how she was progressing, and wish her good-night. But, wearied in body and mind, he fell fast asleep in his chair.

Close on midnight, he was dragged out of merciful oblivion by a shout in the porch.

He sprang up, dazed and shaken. Another confounded wire! But, as he went out to take it, dread eclipsed vexation. Was it Tony? Was the little chap worse than Beryl knew . . . ?

Standing in the hall he opened the horrid thing and read:

Berth reserved S.S. Antonia as instructed.

It was as if someone had hit him in the face. He read the words again — realising; remembering their argument about Eve. Anger stirred in him — tempered with the puzzled reflection, 'Has she been crooked with me always? Or is it only — at a pinch?' He preferred not to glance at the corollary, that it is the pinch that tells. But he felt no compunction about waking her — with the good news.

He found her awake; sitting up in bed, her unbraided hair falling about her shoulders; her startled eyes telling him plainly she had shared his fear.

"From Bombay," he said, handing the wire, and her frank relief moved him to add incisively: "Only one berth. That's all right."

She said nothing. There was nothing to say. He had caught her out again. In that tingling moment, she almost hated him. Her brief glance said as much. Then she sat staring at that welcome scrap of paper, the slow colour staining her cheeks.

It was a relief to hear the door close behind him.

CHAPTER NINE

Life is stronger than a single soul.

CORNELIA SORABJI

*"Sub cheze tyar, Memsahib ki kushi."*¹

It was the voice of Shere Ali — one of the few Indian voices that sounded friendly to Edyth Challoner's ears. It issued from the verandah of the Srinagar Residency, where she had slept the night, in her familiar bedroom; dreary and dismantled, but a place of happy memories — the happiest she had known in India. The garden, a blaze of July flowers, the long verandah fronting the river and the row of giant poplars — that had taken her fancy at sight — put out invisible hands to hold her back.

Strangely enough, the moment of leaving them affected her more definitely than the pang of her dream-like parting with Ian and Eve yesterday afternoon. Ian and Eve belonged to the natural order of her life. She would surely see them again — some day. All this serene and homely beauty of house and garden and lake she might never see again — if Ian really meant what he said? But, of course, he could not mean it . . . for always. He cared, in his own odd fashion; and he was a good man. Sub-consciously, she was trading on that knowledge. Sub-consciously, it had sustained her throughout the whole of that strange morning.

How she had managed to get through it all was one of those insoluble mysteries common to hours of crisis, when mind and will urge the unresisting body to their desired end.

During the fluster and confusion of finishing up, a second wire had come — this time from Carl.

Tony doing well. Don't be anxious.

For the space of a minute it had given her pause. But the voice of Expedience had whispered, 'Why show it to Ian?' The voice of Expedience can very cunningly ape the voice of Wisdom, and Edyth had acted on its comfortable counsel.

¹"All is ready, at the Memsahib's pleasure."

The worst of it was, she could not now remember whether she had torn or crumpled up the wretched thing. She had been so perturbed, just then, between her over-full dressing-bag and her vexatious indecision. But it was useless worrying now.

The relief was unspeakable: and her longing to see the boy again eclipsed every sane consideration whatever. Shaken completely out of herself, the need of the moment was her only law. An unreasoning terror had seized her — it was on her still — lest some unforeseen obstacle should defeat her at the last. In that wrought-up mood, she was capable of brushing aside anything or anyone, sooner than be foiled. Her feet were not set on any rock of principle or clear-eyed faith. Her true gods — though she would roundly have denied it — were convention and habit. Both will stand against severe strain — up to a point. Beyond that point all is quicksand. Of such are the correct, well-regulated people, who — in moments of stress — do incredible things, commit incredible crimes.

On that strange morning of departure, she had scarcely spoken to Ian, or he to her. Yet she knew that, all the while, he was thinking of everything, giving her what help he could. Though it shamed her, she had not dared let herself realise it too clearly, or even be too friendly in her manner, lest her smothered conscience assert itself and upset everything.

There had been an awkward moment at the last, when she had half hoped, half dreaded he might kiss her. But he had not kissed her. He had only shaken hands, asked for news of the boy, given her a roll of notes for extra expenses, and waved aside her attempt at thanks. She could tell from the feel of his hand that he had fever on him; and the knowledge had worried her intermittently all the way down the hill . . .

Now she was descending yet another hill at the breakneck speed affected by native drivers, cheerfully unconcerned for the car or its occupants. If the sins of the *tonga* were many and terrible, the sins of the hired motor on the Kashmir route have a fiendishness all their own: and to Edyth, they came as a horrid revelation in the course of that wild thirty-mile rush to Baramulla.

Coming up, in the spring, they had travelled luxuriously, in

their own big car, with Ian to ensure her comfort and Faizullah to oil the wheels of their going. Now heavy rains had damaged the road; and her charioteer, heedless of remonstrance, dashed round blood-curdling corners, grazed the edges of *khuds* that dropped sheer to the swollen river, foaming and roaring goodness knew how many feet below. Half choked with dust and rank petrol fumes, flung this way and that, till she felt as if her head and neck must part company, intolerable discomfort almost numbed her fears . . .

Once only their nightmare rush was checked with a dislocating jerk; and the driver indicated a horseshoe gap, just ahead of them, where the road had fallen away. Instantly a new terror seized her. If she were balked by some idiotic thing like this, and missed the mail . . . !

“But I *must* go on — I *must!*” she urged, without an idea how it could be done. That was their affair. India was a country where you issued imperious orders — no matter how impossible — and people obeyed.

If the Memsahib would graciously consent to walk across the narrow strip of road, Shere Ali assured her the car could doubtless be coaxed over it by her faithful slaves. She graciously consented; hugging the hillside, thankful to be on her own feet again; while the car was manœuvred across — the right wheels tilted at a perilous angle.

Then on again: faster than ever, it seemed — in spite of her murmured appeal . . .

A steaming hot night in Garhi *dāk*-bungalow, pestered by a plague of flies, reduced her small stock of valour to zero. But valour or no, the wild rush through space must be repeated, lifting her gradually to the higher levels of Murree; landing her, dusty and demoralised, in the verandah of Rowbury’s Hotel.

Murree was blessedly cool; a brief respite, before plunging into hell-fire. She was due to reach Pindi that evening and catch the night mail. Once in the train, she would really feel started — almost secure.

With every mile of descent, the air blew fiercer from the blast

furnace of the Punjab hot weather. She had experienced brief spells of it in her young days, but never so late as mid-July. Ian had wired to a friend of his, who would give her a few hours' rest and refreshment before the real ordeal began.

Down in Pindi one stifled and perspired and tingled. The sultry air was heavy with unbroken thunderstorms. Her whole body was racked with her rough-and-tumble jolting over two hundred miles of road. Physical miseries left no room for any others.

Her hostess looked a washed-out rag. Her host was down with fever; enteric raging among the British troops.

"We do what we can for them," kind Mrs. Ross said simply, while Edyth swallowed iced food and drank thirstily, without quenching a thirst that was unquenchable. "But the hospital wards are over 94 at nine in the morning. If the men stay — they die. If they go — they die. Our adjutant — such a fine fellow . . . John hustled him up to Murree. But the cold and the jolting finished him. He died two hours after he got there . . ."

Edyth was back among the workers and the sufferers, the harsh realities of Indian life, to which she was almost a stranger. Punkahs might flap and doors stand open to the evening air; not an instant's coolness or comfort was theirs.

When she explained about Tony, Mrs. Ross said, in an odd voice, "Lucky woman, having a sick son to go Home to. India has taken mine."

"Yes — that's what it does. I *hate* it," Edyth said vehemently. Here was a kindred spirit.

But Mrs. Ross answered, in quite another tone: "I don't. I love it — in spite of everything."

And Edyth was smitten dumb. That was a frame of mind not dreamt of in her philosophy.

The mail-train compartment — wherein she found herself installed by Shere Ali — was badly lighted and exhaled the fiery breath of an oven; all the heat of twelve blazing hours stored up in it, that there might be no respite when darkness came. Window-panes and woodwork were black with buzzing, crawling flies.

Three nights and two days of it! The prospect unnerved her.

Last time, there had been Eve and Miss Minton. The journey that she grumbled at so freely had been luxurious, compared with this . . .

Ian might be glad of a wire. Having written the address, she hesitated — for one quaking moment — not on his account, but on her own. If indecision was brief, the credit was not all with Tony. She had a wholesome dread of Ian's caustic tongue.

"'Ladies' Carriage' — not an empty one," she had told Shere Ali, who nodded sagely, having received the same instruction from his Sahib.

Her companion in misery was a young woman with an ailing baby, a wrinkled, wizened creature that wailed weakly and would not be comforted. The sight of it stirred Edyth to pity, and she thought, 'What a crazy fool the woman is!' She also thought, 'If the poor little thing frets like that all night, *I shan't sleep a wink.*'

Thankful to be rid of her clothes, she slipped into a muslin dressing-gown. The young woman, eyeing her enviously, dared not cease a moment from fanning her baby, or the hovering swarm of flies would settle all over it, crawl into its mouth and eyes.

Edyth — feeling sympathetic, in spite of disapproval — offered to relieve her, said a few friendly words. And the girl nearly broke down.

"It *does* seem a shame, doesn't it? He was beginning to look so bonny. Harry — my husband — was coming up, too. But they've wired. He's bad with fever. I couldn't leave my lamb. People aren't keen to be responsible. And I lost — my first baby. It's so kind of you."

Edyth — feeling awkward and shamed — could only pat the thin shoulder, say correct, comforting things, and fan that puckered semblance of a child, while its mother snatched a hasty cup of tea.

Then she explored her own portly tiffin basket: and the evidences it revealed of Ian's unfailing thoughtfulness brought sudden tears to her eyes. He had remembered how she hated Indian

station meals, especially in the heat: and here, cunningly packed, were all her favourite dainties; enough to last one day, if not longer. Shere Ali — probably by order — had installed a block of ice in the toilet compartment. They chiefly used it to saturate their handkerchiefs and fling them dripping, over head and face. Even Edyth had no regard for appearances any more . . .

At Lahore, next morning, she parted company with that heroic little mother and her phantom babe. Watching them till they were absorbed in the yelling, perspiring crowd, she thought, 'It's all very well despising Anglo-Indian women. One doesn't often see . . . the other side.'

And thereafter she was alone — hour after blazing hour. No living being for company, save the flies, that hovered and buzzed and crawled without ceasing. They squelched when she leaned against her leather cushion. They became tangled in her hair. They made a dead set at her eyes. Before the end of that journey, she came to hate them as she had never hated anything on earth.

All day she sat with lowered blinds, in a feeble pretence at keeping out the furnace blast, that penetrated and saturated, till her compartment seemed made of burning metal and her head felt as if it must burst. A fine coating of dust was her garment, and moisture trickled ceaselessly all over her body . . .

Though sunset brought no coolness, it brought a faint respite. She could sit on the hot little iron seat outside the carriage door and breathe; and watch India slipping away from her mile by mile.

The second night was worse than the first. Thunderstorms, that hung heavy in the air, burst with ungoverned fury over the parched land and the hurtling, rocking train. Thunder crashed and roared and crashed again. Lightnings leered, like mocking heat phantoms, through gaps between blinds and window. Breathless and palpitating, she hid her face in the pillow till the fury abated and the rain came down in sheets and torrents — worthy of Gulmarg. Then she dozed a little, fitfully — and dreamed herself back in Kashmir . . .

Towards the small hours, it struck her that the stations were noisier than usual. When Shere Ali looked in, with polite enquir-

ies, he explained that cholera was raging in this part of the country. The people were fleeing from it and were 'very much angry,' having been told it was the doing of the Sirkar.

At the next station — fearful yet curious — she let up one blind and looked out. In the wavering yellow light, a confusion of distorted faces and half-naked bodies leaped and jostled and yelled. She caught, now and then, the war-cry of the moment — "Out with all English monkeys! *Gandhi ki jai! Hindu-Mussalmān ki jai.*"

A crowd of them stormed the compartment next her own — and were hurled back like waves that break upon a rock. Through the uproar, she caught the welcome sound of an Englishman's voice, and felt vaguely safer.

But relief was short-lived.

Next moment, her own door was dragged open. Half a dozen brown bodies came tumbling in, crying their horrid cry.

She sat up and shouted at them as sternly as she dared. They gibed and mimicked her and huddled themselves on the ground, close to the door.

In despair, she leaned out of her window. But an ominous clank and jolt told her it was too late. They were off. As likely as not, a two hours' run before the train would stop again.

Half frightened, half disgusted, she shrank into her corner; and the grim thought intruded, if they were fleeing from cholera, they might give it to *her*.

When she gesticulated, bidding them keep their distance, they spat and made mouths at her. A half-naked youth shouted: "*Gandhi ki jai!*"

Then they begged for food. She flung them biscuits as if they were animals at the Zoo. They grew bolder and begged for *pice*. She flung them some coppers out of her bag — vaguely recalling a Russian story of a sledge pursued by wolves; and wondering . . . what next?

Mercifully they became quieter; huddled together, knees up to their chins. Now and then one of them raucously cleared his throat and spat — red saliva, like blood. Then — their heads wobbling weirdly — they seemed to sleep.

Edyth dared not so much as close her eyes. They might be shamming, waiting to spring up and attack her. She lay there, staring at them, thinking over and over — ‘If only Ian were here! How furious he would be!’

Perversely, increasingly, she found herself longing for him, remembering all his good points, now that she had deserted him, and he had virtually cast her off — for the time being. Increasingly she realised that she had left the field free for Mrs. Vane, who would not care a rap if people talked, so long as she could enjoy Ian’s society . . .

When the train drew up at last, it was near dawn. The terrible group on the floor waxed lively again. She flung down her window and shouted . . .

Shere Ali came running, and the guard . . . and, at last, she was alone.

Between relief and utter weariness, she fell sound asleep, for the first time since she left Srinagar.

Bombay, in the cool of early morning, seemed Elysium — and she, a spirit escaped from nether fires. A breezy hotel, a warm bath, a three-course breakfast, conjured her into her serene well-groomed self once more. There was another wire from Carl:

Tony better. Delighted to welcome you.

There was her ship actually waiting. In a few hours, now, she would be safe on board. The sight and the smell of the sea lifted her heart. It seemed almost England; though well she knew two weeks of purgatory stretched between her and journey’s end.

Before breakfast was over, she became aware that something was wrong. But she shrank from asking questions. The terror was on her again of some malign frustration at the eleventh hour.

Waiting was unbearable. It would be nice to go out and get some little presents for the children. They would all be expecting something from India.

When she enquired at the bureau about a taxi, the man looked dubious; and a stranger, standing near her, said — as one in au-

thority — “We are not letting anyone leave the hotel at present — till we see how matters develop.”

She looked — and felt — aghast. “But” — she murmured in blank dismay — “I’m catching the Home mail.”

“So are a good many others here — if the strikers permit.”

“Strikers?”

She looked so shaken that he said kindly: “If you’ll come into the coffee-room, a moment . . . ?”

The coffee-room was empty. He introduced himself as Major de Wynton, of the Bombay Police.

“De Wynton?” she echoed. “*I’m* a de Wynton.”

They discovered they were second cousins — and he was kinder than ever. But there could be no question of shopping. A big strike had been threatened. The authorities had not been prompt enough. There was an ugly temper in the city.

“It’s touch and go whether we scotch a riot — or have a big flare-up,” he told her frankly. “We’re taking every precaution. We’ll get the passengers aboard if it’s any way possible. There’s nothing for it but to wait.”

So she waited: seeing herself caught like a mouse in a trap — if a bad rising took place; unable either to get on to Tony or back to Ian.

By the time she had quite decided that all was lost, Major de Wynton reappeared. Things were still in a critical state; but the strike seemed to be hanging fire. Passengers were getting to the ship.

“If you’ll accept my escort,” he concluded, “I’ll take you in my own car, and a couple of my men along with us.”

She accepted, with un-Edyth-like warmth of gratitude. Her luck had turned. Nothing could stop her now.

They reached the Apollo Bunder without mishap. The fairest harbour in the world was thronged with shipping, with the going and coming of small craft upon the silken smooth water. Great vessels lay at anchor, awaiting their human cargo.

“There she is. That’s the Antonia.” Major de Wynton pointed her out; and Edyth’s heart seemed actually to flutter in her throat.

While de Wynton issued orders, a man came running up; a hotel *peon*, breathless with haste. He held out a red envelope: "Urgent telegram, Memsahib. Just received."

She opened it, with quaking fingers — and read:

Colonel Challoner seriously ill with typhoid.

NORMAN

She stood motionless — trying to take it in; her slow-moving brain wrenched between the tug of a terrible reality and the resolve, amounting to mania, that had possessed her since the coming of that other telegram at Gulmarg. The maddening sense of frustration — just when, at last, she felt secure — unnerved her utterly. Even now, one half of her heart cried desperately, 'I must go — I must!'

Her senses grew blurred. She swayed — and would have fallen but that de Wynton secured her arm.

"Bad news?" he asked kindly.

"My husband." She handed him the telegram. She heard her own voice, saying mechanically, "Will you . . . very kindly . . . take me back again? And send a wire, please — 'Returning at once.'"

He helped her into the car — and she lay back limply with closed eyes; numbed for the moment to acute sensation: hardly aware, even, of her awakened anxiety for Ian; only one clear thought in her mind: 'That appalling journey!'

It was all to do over again.

CHAPTER TEN

*Thought and feeling and soul and sense
Merged, in a moment — which gives me, at last,
You around me, for once, you beneath me, above me,
The moment Eternal, just that — and no more.*

BROWNING

IN the turmoil and the complicated miseries of her journey, Edyth had long since forgotten her passing doubt as to whether or no she had destroyed that second wire from Home. The obvious importance of destroying it convinced her that she must have done so, mechanically, with her thoughts elsewhere.

As a matter of fact, in that vexatious moment of indecision, Miss Minton had appeared, with a tray-load of forgotten trifles. Edyth, feeling guilty, had flung the vexatious thing onto her dressing-table — and had not given it another thought, till she recalled it in the car.

There it lay — crumpled but self-evident — when Sarani, ayah, carried off the tray.

And there Ian Challoner found it, when he strayed into his wife's deserted bedroom on the afternoon of her flight.

He glanced at it casually, taking it for the earlier one. Then his eye noted the word 'Carl' at the end, not in the middle. Puzzled, he picked it up; read it — and re-read it: and the mists of unreality were rudely dispelled.

She had received *that* this morning. She had not said a word. She had persisted in going. She had even forgotten to tear up the beastly thing.

He stood very still, letting the significance of those blunt facts soak into his mind. It was almost as if she were determined to knock away every stone that kept his feet from slipping, every consideration that withheld him from capitulating to the urgent demand of his heart. More, she had left him in a mood which revived, in full force, a temptation he honestly believed he had put behind him for good.

With an oath, he crumpled the telegram in his left hand and went absently back into the hall.

A thin, fine rain was falling. Faizullah had lighted a blazing fire. He at least divined — if his mistress did not — that his Sahib had some illness on him more serious than the familiar fever devil. Also, he was alone; and the talking of a fire made cheerful company.

Eve and Miss Minton had gone over, as usual, to Nedou's Hotel, where Miss Minton taught a small class of mixed ages, certain afternoons of the week. The house was empty, utterly, as only an Indian house can be. The silence of it weighed upon him: yet — after this morning, it was a relief.

Leaning an elbow on the mantelpiece — he became aware of his clenched left hand. He opened it mechanically — and the scrap of paper that had betrayed Edyth fluttered onto the flames. Watching it curl and burn, the involuntary thought came to him that the twenty chequered years of his married life were shrivelling to ashes, there before his eyes. Mere fantasy of a tired brain, perhaps; but at the moment it seemed curiously real.

In her own fashion, presumably she had loved him. Their marriage had been, in the main, her doing: and he himself had arrived at loving her — in his own fashion. But now — by what name dared one call the jangle of sensations evoked in him by the thought of her, by the sight of her — even in fancy? Had her life with him always been a tissue of insincerities and suppressions of the truth?

Anger surged in him. A recent photograph of her stood on the mantelpiece confronting him. Sharply, instinctively, he laid it flat on its face. Yet, no less instinctively, he would protect her, whitewash her meticulously in the eyes of Gulmarg.

A light step sounded in the porch. He started and pulled himself up, without looking round. Fever was buzzing in his brain. Dread of an intrusion that would involve explanations made him feel downright ill.

There was no call for the *peon*. The intruder seemed to be pausing on the threshold. A low, unmistakable voice asked: "May I come in?"

She was there — she, to whom Edyth had tacitly surrendered him. He felt too dazed for surprise. The blood drummed in his ears. He turned without moving towards her.

“You . . . ?”

His strangeness of aspect startled her. “Is it — very serious?” she asked gently. “I heard there had been a wire from Home. I only wanted to say how sorry we are. I know how Mrs. Chal-loner —” The look in his eyes scattered polite enquiries to the winds. “Oh, *what* is it?” she cried in frank dismay.

At that he pulled himself together and said in a slow, contained voice: “A motor accident — Tony hurt . . . a bit. Edyth . . . has gone Home.”

“Gone?”

“Yes.”

He leaned an elbow on the mantelpiece to steady himself, and stood so, half turned from her, his brain dazed, his pulses hammering.

And she — raging at the irony of it all — divined intuitively how things had happened, almost as if he had told her.

She drew a step nearer, resenting the scruple that would not let her comfort him with the touch of her hand.

“I don’t want to worry you. But . . . you are *ill*. Do take care of yourself.”

He did not move. His left hand was clenched hard. Dim scruples went down before the urge of her womanhood, her pity and his pain.

“Ian . . . !” Her voice shook.

At that, without a word, he swung round and caught her to him; gathered her close; held her as if he would never let her go.

The sight of her, the feel of her — warm and living in his arms — was like a draught of spring water to a man dying of thirst.

“Vanessa!” he breathed at last: then, deliberately turned his head — and his lips found hers . . .

It may have been three minutes by the fussy little clock that ticked out their fragment of eternity: it may have been

less. Then life and its impertinent realities flowed in on them again.

Challoner's eye lighted instantly on Edyth's photograph lying face downwards. A small shiver chilled his spine. His heart jerked unevenly. His body would exact payment for that measureless exaltation of spirit.

She knew it also; and her fingers tightened on his arm. "Ian — sit," she whispered, half afraid to speak, lest she wake and find it all a dream.

He obeyed. Sinking onto the couch near the fire, he drew her down with him involuntarily, so that she kneeled beside him; and at last they looked straight at one another — realising . . .

"Good God!" he murmured, such depths of pain and passion in his voice, that she felt afraid. He was 'coming to,' as it were. And then . . . ?

Almost, it seemed, he read her thought, her fear. Gravely and very tenderly, he took her head between his hands and looked deep into her eyes. It was as if the searchlight of his spirit invaded all her inmost sanctuaries, seeking and finding the immortal essence of her that no man, hitherto, had ever appeared to recognise.

"Beloved woman," he said, low and urgently, "what *are* we doing? *Where* are we going . . . ?"

It was the challenge she had dreaded, knowing it must come.

Her lips quivered. "Oh, my dear — my *dear* — !" she murmured — and suddenly she felt that he was shaking all over; his teeth chattering, do what he would. "Ian, you *are* ill. You must get to bed at once. I'll send for Dr. Saunders."

His breath came short and uneven. "I'm done," he admitted, at last, trying to smile. "I feel all giddy and queer . . ."

"Can you manage . . . ?"

"Yes. In a minute."

Dizziness stupefied him. He leaned his head to her breast; and she held it close, her fingers caressing his hair.

Very nearly his senses slipped from him. And there stole into his mind a thought that was almost a prayer: "Merciful God . . . if *this* . . . might be the end . . . ?"

But the end was not yet, of that strange day. Dr. Saunders, summoned post-haste, pronounced the dread word — enteric.

“I’d a warning from Norman,” he told Vanessa, when they were alone together, “that something was wrong. I was coming round to-morrow to see if I could get anything out of him. But enteric — and Mrs. Challoner gone Home . . . ! Good Lord! He must have had it on him, these many days.”

They were silent, both, with the knowledge between them that, after forty, enteric is as deadly as it is rare.

“It’ll be a matter of staying power,” Dr. Saunders concluded heavily; “of the will to live. We can r-rely on Nor-r-man, sending the best nur-rse available.”

“And you can rely on me to help her all I can. I’ve nursed enteric, in war-time hospitals. I’ll carry on, single-handed — with Faizullah — till she comes to-morrow.”

“Ye will? — Thank God! He’ll need all that man — and woman can do for him.”

“He shall have it,” she answered with steady lips.

“I’ll go over to the Palace meself.”

“Thank you — and Major Thorne, too, please.”

In this amazing fashion, she stepped — or rather she was thrust by a swift turn of events — straight into Edyth Challoner’s empty place. She had no leisure to consider the strangeness of it; no leisure to consider anything but the cruel fact that *his* life hung in the balance.

She decided not to put off their guests. It was a gathering of intimates; only the Leighs and Kaye, Major Thorne and Captain Eden. They would all want to come. They would all want to know. There would be much to arrange. Not to mention the delicate task of putting Mrs. Challoner’s abrupt departure in the best possible light — for his sake. Irony heaped on irony! That she should be called upon — not merely to take his wife’s place, but to shield her from adverse criticism. She did not fail to notice the photograph lying on the mantelpiece: and that trifling act, so unlike his normal self, told her more than would a score of words. ‘It won’t do, though,’ was her instant thought. And she set the hated thing upright, with half-averted eyes. Then, her pulses fluttering, she went to the door of his room.

Outside it, Faizullah squatted on guard. He stood up and raised a warning finger. "Asleep, Memsahib. Fever-sleep; but good."

"Tell me when he wakes," she said, and went back into the hall — longing to see him, yet thankful that he slept. If it was her fault that he had given way, who could tell whether just that moment of relaxed tension, of craving satisfied, might not be the saving of him?

In the dim, unlighted hall she sat down by the fire, feeling blessedly at home, to wait for Eve and Miss Minton and the rest; holding her mind on practical things. She had sent a note to Chris, who was off somewhere with Kaye; another note to Thea, preparing the ground.

Eve and Miss Minton must be sent out of harm's way. Thea would take them under her wing. The child must not guess that matters were serious: only the need for absolute quiet and a spare room for the nurse. Chris, to a certainty, would insist on joining her at the Residency, where she intended to take up her abode — till Ian was through the worst — let Gulmarg say what it chose. And, of course, one would have to wire — a shiver of dread ran through her. But one could not catch Mrs. Challoner before Bombay. She hoped Kaye would be amenable over Chris. The girl need not go near the sick-room; and she would be a comfort in a dozen ways . . .

Eve and Miss Minton arrived, laughing cheerfully. It was a bad quarter of an hour telling the child; facing, and only half allaying, her wide-eyed dismay.

Then came the others . . . forewarned by her notes. The look in Kaye's eyes was hard to bear. That this great day of his life should be so tragically overshadowed . . . !

He did not prove exactly amenable when Chris announced that, in the morning, she would come over, bag and baggage, and be Vanessa's 'right-hand man' till further orders. Cloaking his fears, because of Eve, he suggested she would be better at the hotel. But she would not have it; and he was too troubled, at heart, to press the point.

When Faizullah brought word that his patient was awake,

Kaye insisted on going in to him. He *must* see the Colonel and have his blessing — or there would be no luck at all. Eve insisted too, so tensely that Thea — in her mother-wisdom — counselled letting her see him, this once. And they went off together, hand in hand.

The poor pretence of talk died away. Eden took his leave. Miss Minton tactfully effaced herself, and Vanessa drew Thea into the drawing-room, leaving the men in the hall with their cigars. Thea would be a Godsend; but she had an inkling that Major Thorne might prove intractable over the nursing.

He did. He deliberately outstayed the Leighs; waited till Chris and Kaye had gone over to the hut for a few immediate necessities; then he launched his attack: a brief one — foredoomed to failure, as he probably knew very well.

“Don’t fuss about it, please — or I shall lose my temper,” was her final word on the subject. “I’ll take every precaution, of course. But it’s up to us all to do what we can. And for enteric, nursing’s everything. — Good-night.”

She gave him her hand. He wrung it hard. “You’ll let me know . . . ? Make use of me all you can?”

Her face softened under the dumb devotion of his gaze. “Oh, as to that, I’ll be ruthless — to everyone, all round!”

He *knew*. She saw that he knew. And Thea knew — and Kaye and Chris. Would all Gulmarg know presently?

In her emotionally exalted mood, she was miles removed from Gulmarg and its futile curiosities. Mind, body, and nerves, she was strung up, like a man going into action; moving as it were in a dream, yet with her wits acutely on the alert as to all that concerned Ian Challoner and his immediate needs.

Till the worst was over, she was a woman of one idea.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Love, that has robbed us of immortal things,
This little moment mercifully gave.*

MEREDITH

SHE found him fallen asleep again: a troubled, tossing sleep. In his restlessness, he muttered incoherently. Now and then she caught her own name: the new thrill of it so swiftly turned to pain.

She had changed, for comfort, into her yellow and brown wrapper; and established herself in a cushioned chair, not far from the bed. A night-light in a small basin made a quavering pool of radiance near the washing-stand. Larry — an ink-black streak — lay full length on the bedside rug. Faizullah slept on a mat outside the door, in case of need.

She alone waked, in all the silent house. It was her one night of privilege. To-morrow a strange nurse would take her place: day duty would fall to her share. And yesterday — a lifetime ago, when they parted on the Circular Road — she had more than doubted if they would ever again have an hour together alone . . .

It was nearly eleven, when at last he turned his head in a more natural manner — and opened his eyes. The slow dawn of light — and more than light — in them, as he realised her presence, was full and sufficient reward for the hours she had waited to be in touch with him again.

“*Vanessa!*” he whispered. “You — here?”

She smiled on him as a mother smiles on her first-born. “Where else would I be — with you ill, and needing me?”

She read the thought in his eyes. He was going to be intractable, too.

“Anywhere — but in the sick-room . . . if it’s typhoid,” he said. “The risk . . . I won’t have it.”

Still smiling, she raised an authoritative hand. “Ian — my dear, I’ve undertaken this. And I don’t go back on it . . . even

for you. I'll take any fancy precautions needed, but here I stay. A nurse will be here to-morrow. I shall be at her disposal. Thea is mothering Eve and 'Sminny. And *you* are under orders now."

His gaze dwelt upon her dimly illumined face: the oblique brows, the lips tenderly humorous — no strangers to him, now; the high courage in her lifted head and shining eyes. To his sick fancy and his exalted heart, it seemed the face of an angel.

And she stood there, returning his gaze, with never a word. Then she went over to the table near the window, busied herself with bottles and glasses, and, returning, leaned over him, resetting his pillows.

The silk of her loose hanging sleeve brushed his cheek, like a butterfly's wing. Shyly, irresistibly, he fingered it; recognised it . . .

She heard his deep-drawn breath, and looked down at him in quick concern.

"Any pain?"

"No." He still held her sleeve. "I was — remembering. I love . . . that thing."

"This — ? *You* . . . ?"

Absorbed in his needs, she did not at once catch the connection.

"Have you forgotten? I saw you in it . . . that night at Sonamarg, when I gave you two a fright."

The colour mantled under her clear skin. He dared not raise a hand and touch her cheek.

"*Forgotten?* — D'you know how *I* spent that night?"

"How? Tell me."

"Walking in the moonlight and lying under a pine-tree — till dawn . . . thinking chiefly . . . of you."

"Of me . . . ?"

She nodded slowly; her eyes deep in his. "That — was my real birthday night. You remember the date? July the third. And the way I celebrated it — this year! Not entirely . . . according to plan!"

He let out another deep breath — and concern for him was paramount again.

"Dearest — we mustn't talk. Unless I'm stern with you, I betray my trust. Try and go to sleep again."

"And you . . . ? In that beastly chair . . . all night?"

"Never mind me. I've spent nights in worse places. And I'm too — too altogether above myself to bother about sleep. That's your province. Now . . . turn away from me, please. And — hush!"

She saw the longing in his eyes; and she gave him her hand. He clung to it, pressed it against his lips — and let it go. Then he obeyed her implicitly, and turned away.

For a few minutes, she remained standing by him, stroking his hair, till his breathing grew calmer. Then she went back to her chair — and her vigil.

About noon Nurse Dawson arrived from Srinagar — a plump, homely body, with no official airs or fine-lady pretences about her. Vanessa dreading an up-to-date, cast-iron hospital Sister — years younger than herself and centuries superior — was proportionately relieved. Incipient antagonism evaporated. She could surrender Ian to those motherly hands, almost without a pang.

That night, his temperature ran up alarmingly. Next morning, he knew no one, not even her. His mind wandered ceaselessly, in muttered, disjointed talk; the anguish of it tempered by the thrill of hearing her own name, linked with impassioned words of love. Sitting alone with him, at these times, she had a strange, uplifted sense of being admitted into the secret places of his heart. For all his disordered brain, his broken thoughts bore the stamp of his inmost self.

Sometimes, when she came to feed him, or smooth his pillows, he would catch at her hands and crush them against his lips that were dry and burning. He would look at her with eloquent, unseeing eyes. He would call her 'wife,' 'dearest and best'; beseech her not to go Home and leave him alone; vow he would throw up everything . . . utterly unaware of her tears raining upon his hands, that held her . . . and would not let her go. Only once he called her Edyth — and that name on his lips, passionately

spoken, hurt her more than all the anxiety she was enduring on his behalf.

Later, she found herself wondering — did he talk like that to the good Dawson? If so, what did she make of it all? It might be advisable to speak a word or two — distasteful as it was.

Meeting her in the morning, when she 'handed over,' Vanessa forced herself to ask: "Is the delirium very troublesome at night?"

"Oh, shocking," came the prompt reply; "he keeps calling for you, something pitiful."

"That's his poor muddled brain," Vanessa lied valiantly. "Naturally, he imagines . . . I'm his wife."

The homely one nodded sagely. "In that state — they do, poor dears. It's awkward, isn't it? But you *must* humour them. I've had them do the same to me."

The anti-climax of it made Vanessa want to laugh wildly. But she was restricted to a discreet smile; which was just as well — or the tears would come: hysterics might ensue.

Yet she could not resist the tentative question: "Does he . . . ever . . . ?"

"Oh, no. Not this gentleman." (Was there a hint of reassurance in the comfortable voice?) "He's pinned his fancy onto you! He says queer things, though. Got a lot on his mind, I should say. And that's not helping him — or us. We can't touch that, though. It's the fever we've got to fight."

A desperate, hand-to-hand fight it was, for the next few nights and days. Though ice-packs lowered his temperature, it would be up again, in an hour or so, higher than ever. Each bad bout left him weaker than the last. It was a case of staying power, as Dr. Saunders said.

Vanessa lived and moved throughout, like a dream woman in a dream world — a world bounded by the four walls of Ian's sick-room and the insistent demands made on brain and body by typhoid fever at its maximum.

At night, she tried to sleep, because her strength must be husbanded — for his use. And all day her nerves were at strain, her wits preternaturally alert. Everything was done with the accu-

racy of a metronome: milk and broth, every hour or so, in regular rotation: now the cap of crushed ice to be refilled; now a fresh change of sheets — with Faizullah for *aide*, handling his beloved master gently as a woman, yet with muscles of iron.

Outside the sick-room, faces came and went — kind and helpful all of them; but moving only on the edge of her consciousness. There was Chris, at her inimitable best — always available for any small service: Kaye, with a distraught look in his eyes, forcing his way now and then into the sick-room, the depth of his affection for 'the Colonel' revealed to Vanessa, as never before.

There was Major Thorne's face, at intervals, doubly weighted with anxiety for her and his friend; and Eve's appearing daily, large-eyed and pitiful, asking over and over: "Isn't he better *yet*? Mayn't I see him now?"

And Thea — was there anyone on earth like Thea, and that quiet, understanding husband of hers? Only at a time like this one really discovered what people were worth.

On the outskirts hovered the Maharajah himself, acutely distressed — sending everything he could think of, useful and otherwise, for "*Hamara Chull'ner Sahib.*"¹ And on the farthest outskirts hovered the little English colony of Gulmarg. The Bachelors' Dance was 'off,' and a big Gymkhana gathering indefinitely postponed. Anglo-Indians, as a whole, are a sympathetic breed. Either they themselves have suffered, in like fashion, or they know in their hearts it may be their own turn next.

Mrs. Chamier — it need hardly be said — advertised her deep concern for "the Resident" by emphasising the absence of his wife — in a confidential undertone.

"Of course, poor dear Mrs. Challoner *must* have seen how things were going — you know what I mean? Naturally, she found a pretext to get away from an embarrassing position. *I* don't blame her." Tone and words, alike, implied a slur on the character of Mrs. Vane — who knew nothing and cared nothing for any of these things. For her, in those days, Mrs. Chamier was extinct; Gulmarg was extinct; Edyth Challoner was extinct — very nearly . . .

¹ My Challoner Sahib.

On the third morning, she realised — with a two-edged pang — that it was mail-day; that the telegram to Bombay had not yet been sent. Anxiety for Ian had obliterated every other thought. Dr. Norman had been summoned from Srinagar. She had seen the two men afterwards — she and Kaye — and their grave faces had told her more than their reticent Scotch tongues. Dr. Norman's opinion of the case was crystallised in his announcement that he would remain in Gulmarg till the crisis was past.

Vanessa — beset by that hateful telegram — left Faizullah in charge, and hurried away in search of Chris.

“Oh, my sweet,” she cried, shaken out of her schooled composure — “we *must* wire at once to Bombay. I meant to — yesterday. But how *could* one think of anything?” She gazed at the girl a moment — dry-eyed and desperate — then frankly spoke her rebellious thoughts: “It's hateful — having to, knowing what one knows . . . or rather divines. I'm certain he'd say ‘No,’ if one could ask him. He would never drag her back, through that awful heat — to no purpose. But there you are . . . she's his wife” — her voice broke upon the word — “the proprieties must be placated, at any cost. The realities haven't a look-in. If *she* wants to bolt ever so, she can't — in the face of that wire. She deserves it; but still . . .” Her lips shook and she dashed an impatient hand across her eyes. “I'll get Dr. Norman to sign the horrid thing.”

Once it had gone, she knew not a moment's peace of mind till the answer arrived. Shamelessly, she hoped against hope that the message might either fail to catch Mrs. Challoner — or fail to turn her from her purpose. And all the while she ministered to him, wrestled with the fever, wrote up her chart with clockwork regularity . . .

After endless hours . . . it came: three words; three separate blows on her heart:

Returning at once.

In her overwrought state, it seemed as if the hours of her life were numbered. She grudged even five minutes away from him. All night she scarcely slept.

The morning brought a second wire.

Delayed Bombay owing to riots. Will wire again.

The utterly unexpected relief of it unnerved her. Only by a sheer effort of will she saved herself from fainting outright . . .

After that day of climax, the fever seemed to have spent itself . . . for the time being. But dread familiarity with typhoid told them all it would return. And it did.

It was a week of ups and downs — on the sick-room chart and on the hidden chart of Vanessa's tremulous spirit, that dared not hope — yet could not despair.

It brought intermittent spells of peace by his bedside, when the man she loved once more looked out of his eyes — and knew her, and was glad of her coming: spells when they could talk a little, very quietly, or she could play to him, on muted strings, till he dropped asleep.

It was during one of those spells — when he seemed almost himself again — that he told her of his dream, on the march back from Leh, of the sudden recognition that flashed on him at Gangabal.

She listened, sitting in her low chair, by his bed: and the eerie coincidence — if it was no more — the hint of a spiritual link between them, strangely comforted her heart.

Not daring to speak, she lifted his hand, that lay on the coverlet — and kissed it.

“Vanessa!” he half reproached her.

“That's how I *feel* about it,” she whispered passionately.

And at that very moment, Faizullah's voice sounded outside the door.

“Memsahib — *tar argya.*”¹

It was from Edyth Challoner: only two words:

Starting immediately.

It made Vanessa feel she would hate the sight of a telegram for the rest of her natural life. For now — he must be told.

Curiously enough, since delirium had abated, he had not

¹ Telegram has come.

mentioned her: and Dr. Norman — consulted by Vanessa — had decreed that nothing should be said to him till they heard all was safe and his wife actually starting. There must be no anxiety: no strain. . . . And she alone knew they were powerless to save him from the severest strain of all — the strain of his wife's return.

When she told him, he gazed at her blankly — trouble dawning in his eyes.

“But I thought — she sailed for Home . . . ages ago.”

“My dear — it's barely a week,” Vanessa gently reminded him — and proceeded to explain in the fewest possible words. “And now it's over — she's coming.”

“Coming — ?” he echoed, trying to take it in. Then he looked away from her, and let out a slow breath. His only comment was characteristic of his whole attitude to Edyth. “It seems cruel hard lines . . . That terrible journey — all over again.”

But his slow sigh told her how utterly unfit he was for the effort of control that her coming involved . . .

That night, fever and delirium raged again: and only Vanessa knew why.

It proved a less obstinate bout; and he rallied surprisingly. But Norman — dreading the strain on his heart — watched over him with the eyes of a lynx; and his two lieutenants in the sick-room meticulously fulfilled his most exacting demands. He had not forgotten Kargil — and his own shrewd summing-up of the woman who had ‘a chin on her.’ At moments, he asked himself, uneasily, “What's behind all this?” At others, in his capacity of doctor, he cared not a jot what was behind, so long as she responded to the spur and pulled Colonel Challoner through.

There came a morning at last — following upon a night of true sleep — when he looked and spoke like a wan ghost of his normal self. He was even well enough to be a shade intractable.

Mrs. Challoner had wired from Murree. She was due to arrive that evening. When Vanessa handed him the slip of paper, he had glanced at it, nodded, and laid it aside. Then, for a long moment,

he looked at her steadily — the man who was hers and the man who was that other's contending strangely in his gaze.

"Tell them, please," he said, in a contained voice, "to have everything ready and comfortable for her."

Not another word.

Then they spoke of Eve, who had startled them all by collapsing — suddenly and completely. Through the worst, she had been white and miserable, but tensely controlled. At the first touch of relief, of hope, she fell to sobbing hysterically in Thea's arms. Nothing would comfort her but the assurance that she should see him, if only for a few minutes.

Dr. Norman — gravely shaking his head at her — had given consent. "Not more than ten minutes: and every precaution, mind."

"That means . . . you mustn't kiss him, darling," Vanessa told the child, before they went in: and Eve's look pierced her heart.

"Only his hand — mayn't I?" she pleaded — "like when he has a cold."

Vanessa conceded his hand: and Eve, kneeling by the bedside, kissed it over and over, in her silent, vehement fashion.

Then she stood up and surveyed him, lying there pale and prostrate; a second pillow barely raising his head and shoulders. His eye sockets were caverns. The virile lines of his face seemed carved out of ivory.

"You look rather a white Pussykins," he said — and there were tears in his eyes.

"*You'd* be white if it was me," she retorted sagely, if ungrammatically. "I've been miserabler than ever in my life." Two fingers cautiously caressed his cheek, shaven that morning by Faizullah. "Oh, my lovely Daddy! What *has* the typhoid done to you?"

"Took and made a scarecrow of me!" he chaffed her, the flicker of a twinkle in his eye.

"No, it couldn't. You're *not* to call yourself names."

"*Hazúr ki kushi!*¹ I've got to take orders from everyone now — even from you!"

¹At your Honour's pleasure.

She sat gingerly on the edge of the bed. She told him what she had been reading: and they made plans for excursions — when he was better. She knew her mother was coming; but she said not a word.

It was he who spoke of it, at the last. "You must come over . . . and see Mummy this evening."

"Oh, yes — I will." It sounded almost like a concession. Then, with a quaint pursing of her lips: "She's been a long time — coming back, hasn't she?"

Vanessa became engrossed in a copy of the "Sphere," that lay open on her elbow table.

She heard Ian's voice say quietly: "There was trouble in Bombay. She couldn't come sooner. She'll be dreadfully tired. You must be good to her, Eve."

"Yes."

The monosyllable in that small, toneless voice was curiously disconcerting.

"Very bad for him," thought Vanessa, in her official capacity. "What craziness has the darling got into her head?"

Then, hardening her heart because of him, she announced that their ten minutes was over: and held up a warning finger lest Eve break down again.

But the child was too overwrought for tears. She had captured his hands. She pressed them against her heart, then against her cheek; kissed them as if she would never let them go.

Watching her, loving her — only second to the man himself — Vanessa thought: "Does she realise . . .? Is she afraid . . .?"

There was no facing that dread question. She could only put her arm round the child and gently manœuvre her away.

When she returned, he was lying with closed eyes, one hand clenched on the coverlet, his lips set and strained. Had it been too much for him? Had they been unwise . . .?

Hoping that he slept, or would soon fall asleep, she sat down in her accustomed chair and dutifully opened a book. But her eyes never left his face.

In honour of this red-letter day, she had put on her primrose knitted silk frock — because he liked it. And he had noticed it at

once. But now . . . ? How on earth were things going to shape themselves between those two? And what on earth had come over Eve?

His lips looked a shade easier; his hand not clenched, only closed . . .

And, suddenly, he opened his eyes. His gaze met hers — and held it, till the blood stirred in her veins. All this week, the nurse in her had resolutely dominated the woman. Now the woman came to her own again.

Desperately their spirits clung together in that one long look, more intimate than any touch of lips or hands. Then she became aware of some thought struggling for utterance.

“Ian — *what* is it?” she asked softly. “I hoped — you were asleep.”

“No. I was thinking. Not an easy process — yet.”

“Darling — don’t think. It’s bad for you.”

His smile had its old touch of bitterness. “Can’t help that. I must risk it.” A brief pause. Then: “Vanessa —” He put out his hand. She gave him her own and his fingers closed on it. “Promise me — if the end comes — this way . . .”

“*Ian!*” There was anguish in her low cry, and his fingers tightened.

“My dear . . . we must face possibilities. And I’m afraid . . . for Eve.”

“So am I,” she admitted, very low.

“*You* understand her,” he went on. “All that is — myself in her loves you, inevitably. Keep in close touch with her . . . I beg of you, as far as — circumstances permit. Promise.”

“Oh, I promise — if there’s need of it. But, Ian —” She drew her chair close to him. “*Don’t* get thinking . . . that. There can only be one issue . . .”

His smile was sadder than tears. “I feel — played out,” he murmured, like a tired child: and it needed all her courage to urge the effort he alone could make.

“Of course you do just now. We’ve dragged you up . . . out of deep waters, we three. Don’t slip — back again. Ian . . . I couldn’t *bear* it.”

She launched her strongest appeal: and the pain of it twitched his lips.

"Is there . . . any limit set? I haven't found it so." He hesitated painfully. "I've got my life — our lives — into a tangle there's no unravelling. Forgive me —"

"I . . . ? It was my doing. It haunts me . . ."

He pressed her fingers with surprising vigour. "Beloved woman — *will* you listen? It's not merely you — or me. There are bigger forces behind, working — in some way — through our puny lives, to what end . . . God knows." He drew a deep breath. His eyes held hers steadily now. "We can't cancel this thing, Vanessa. We've got to reckon with it — and do what seems right to our dim perceptions. It may come to seem right that I should retract . . . certain words I spoke in anger — that I should give up India —"

"No, Ian. Never that. I must go — of course — in September."

He sighed his acquiescence in that hard decree.

"Even so, it might have to be . . . for different reasons. I can't tell — yet. I can't see . . . clearly —"

She rose and leaned over him in a passion of tenderness and concern. "Darling — you *must* keep quiet. Don't try to see anything —"

"Except — *your face*." His eyes lightened strangely. The mute longing in them was more than she could bear. But she dared not yield. It might soothe and comfort him — or it might . . . ?

She covered them lightly with the cool palm of her hand.

"Not even my face, just now," she commanded in her softest tones. "Let your mind drift. And remember — about me — whatever you do, wherever you go from me . . . to the ends of the earth . . . or beyond them — I *have* a part of you that will never leave me. I shall never be quite alone again — I that have always been abysmally alone. I tell you that . . . for your comfort. Now — hush —!"

Very gently, she lifted her hand from his eyelids: and they remained closed.

She stood there looking down at the waxen stillness and fineness of his face; not venturing to stir till she felt sure that sleep had laid hands on him more healing than her own. He needed sleep, to recruit his strength for that imminent, incalculable arrival . . .

Directly she stirred, he opened his eyes: and at once she was aware of a change in him.

"Don't go. You're a miracle-worker. I feel better."

"You sound better! If you really can't sleep, I'll give you an egg-flip."

"Good."

While she prepared it, he lay very still, watching her — the sure grace and lightness of her, the clinging primrose-coloured gown that gave her so girlish an air. But all the while, beneath his content, lurked the little nagging thought — after to-day . . . ?

She stood over him while he sipped luxuriously. It was like imbibing new life.

"Now, play to me, please," he said, returning the cup to her. "That last movement — Gangabal."

The request — and the tone of it — took her aback. She saw, in his eyes, how the strain of his wife's coming was at work in him; the knowledge that their withdrawn, wonderful time together was over. She knew, as if he had spoken, that his thought echoed her own. "This may be the last chance —"

"Are you sure . . ." she asked gently, "you can stand it? You must not get churned up."

"Don't be afraid. That melody is pure healing. It would be — a help."

To such a plea — from him — there could be no refusal. She put away the cup and leaned over him, rearranging his pillow.

"I'll play it," she said, "very softly. And I'll spare you the eagle."

"No. Don't spare me the eagle. It's lacerating. But . . . that's life. If I pull through this, we've got to face life, against odds . . . my Vanessa — eagles and all."

Unexpectedly, he took hold of her arms. His fingers closed on

them with a force that amazed her: and again there stole into his eyes that dumb, desperate longing.

The strain was terribly bad for him. Every instinct, every pulse in her body, impelled her to yield.

In silence, she leaned her face down to his: and they kissed — once: a long, slow kiss, purged from passion. For both it was implicitly a kiss of renunciation.

As she drew herself up, his fingers moved slowly down her arms till they closed on her hands. Neither said a word. Their faces were blurred to one another . . .

At last, she turned from him and went blindly over to where her violin case leaned against the wall.

Standing well away from the bed, near the open French window, she tuned it *sotto voce*. And he, never shifting his eyes from her, had a vision in silhouette, against the light, of her figure, her still profile above the violin, and the curve of her lifted arm.

A moment she stood poised, as on that memorable night, then her bow caressed the strings and there came to him again the haunting, muted melody — so incredibly soft that it seemed an echo of music rather than music itself.

Under the spell of it, tension of mind and body relaxed; peace flooded his spirit like an incoming tide, wave on tranquil wave . . .

And she — standing by the window — played on; looking out across the garden, where the lengthening shadows of trees, and of the house itself, slowly enveloped the brightness beyond. For her, too, there was balm in her own music: there were stirrings of inspiration in her longing to express a tithe of all it had meant for her — that incredible week, at once her crown of glory and of thorns . . .

Sounds of wrangling in the back verandah broke upon her delicate thread of sound. Frowning sharply, she glanced at the bed. He lay utterly still, his eyes closed, his cheek turned restfully against the pillow — sound asleep.

Then she laid down the fiddle and hurried out to silence that wrangling pair. An hour or two of real sleep, now, might prove the turning-point.

She swore at the wranglers: sent Faizullah to warn the whole household; and bade him wait at the end of the drive to prevent Mrs. Challoner's arrival from waking the Sahib. Then she returned to the room that was still her kingdom, for one little hour more.

He had not stirred. His light, even breathing told her he slept the sleep of health, of renewal. Not to disturb him, she sat down near the window, keeping guard, lest any disobey her stringent orders.

The shadows crept stealthily on across the garden. Birds dipped and flitted, with here and there a tuneless note. Swallows skimmed, pursuing invisible insects of early evening. Stillness brooded, like an invisible spirit, without and within. The house was utterly still. And she herself, hands folded loosely in her lap, lifted up her heart in mute thanksgiving that was almost prayer.

Suddenly it seemed to her that the stillness grew ominous. She sat upright; strained her ears to catch his light breathing . . .

Was he breathing? Or was it only Larry — ?

Springing up, she hurried to his bedside . . . terror clutching at her heart.

He lay there, in the same attitude, one hand half open on the coverlet. She fingered his pulse — not a flutter, not a stir. A pain, like a knife, cut across her throat. Hurriedly she slipped a hand over his heart . . .

Then she knew — though she could not all at once believe . . .

She had commanded stillness everywhere because of him: and, while she kept jealous watch over him, he had slipped away from her into the greater Stillness. His overtaxed heart had made its last effort to meet life's inexorable demands . . . and failed.

Stooping, she kissed his forehead and his closed lids, where the faint warmth of life still lingered. Then she dropped on her knees — and the stifled cry broke from her:

"Ian — Ian — *why* did you leave me?"

Distraught — and still half incredulous — she crazily fancied he could not yet be quite beyond the reach of her appeal.

But only the silence answered her and the choking sound of her own dry sobs that shook her — and would not be stilled.

CHAPTER TWELVE

*Thou gotten hast the victory
By thus adventuring to die.*

HENRY KING

SHE was standing in the hall with Dr. Norman, speaking of it all, with steady lips and eyes undimmed. She herself seemed to be somewhere, miles away, overhearing the conversation in which her own quiet voice took part.

In the same detached fashion she had done everything required of her. She had sent Chris with a message to Kaye; had written a note to Thea bidding her break the news to Eve, and send the child round later, when her mother should have arrived. Her own unshaken calm scarcely surprised her. She was still moving on the exalted plane of the past week. It was as if she had simply mislaid her emotions, and waited for the anæsthesia to pass. No sign of grief showed in her, beyond that unnatural calm and the strained line of her lips. She had no right to grieve. She must remain — the sanctuary of his good name; that people, seeing her, might not shake puritanical heads and judge him unfairly.

But Norman's shrewd eyes were not deceived. When sounds of arrival broke upon their low-toned talk, a twitch crossed his rugged face. He had the inner sensitiveness of the crustacean.

"Good Lord . . . ! Poor lady!" he muttered — adding with gruff kindness, "I'll see her first, for-r ye. If you wait . . . in there, I'll come."

She could only thank him with a glance; and he patted her shoulder as she turned away.

Automatically she went back to the room that was her shrine of love and anguish. So unspeakably peaceful he looked, lying there, that incredulity stabbed her afresh.

"Ian!" she whispered, fingering that odd grey streak in his hair. Then sharply she checked herself; sank upon her knees, and covered her face. But no tears came.

She found herself praying — praying, as it were, to him — that he would be near her, that she might speak the right words, when the moment of contact came. She found herself unable to picture Mrs. Challoner deeply, sincerely moved; unable, therefore, to foresee how things would go — to forearm herself against the unexpected.

When she rose from her knees, her surface calm had penetrated a little deeper, become a shade less unreal. And as she stood so — unable to shift her eyes from the nobility of his carven face — Dr. Norman opened the door.

She went to him quickly, strung up to meet any demand laid on her, now.

“She’s in a queer, dazed state,” he said, under his breath. “A bad knock — with that terrible journey and all. I thought . . . could she see him . . . ? But she won’t — not yet, poor soul! If ye could fall weeping on her-r neck now — ?”

Vanessa’s lips trembled to a smile —

“Or-r lose your temper over something — shake her up somehow — ”

“Oh, but that would be unkind . . .”

“It might be healthier, though,” he said sagely — and left her with her problem on her hands.

She found Edyth Challoner in the drawing-room — mercifully not in the hall — sitting in Ian’s big chair, her chin on her hands, staring straight before her at the cascade of ferns massed in the empty hearth. She had laid aside hat and veil and unfastened her travelling-coat, without removing it.

When the door opened, she neither spoke nor stirred; and Vanessa’s shrinking was changed to pity; so bowed down she looked with weariness and the weight of her dumb misery.

Very quietly she drew near and laid her hand on the shoulder of Ian’s wife.

Edyth’s upward glance was empty of surprise, of recognition, even. And Vanessa thought instinctively: ‘She looks five years older. Probably I look ten.’

“Mrs. Challoner —” she began. “It’s too terrible —”

But Edyth cut her short.

"Where's Eve?" Her voice was expressionless as her gaze.

Vanessa — checked in her natural impulse of sympathy — said mechanically: "She's at Nedou's, with Thea. They went over there at once — she and Miss Minton. We felt she was better away — for every reason."

That "we" penetrated Edyth's blurred brain, which had grasped two facts only: Ian was gone — having dragged her back through that hideous second journey; and Mrs. Vane was living in the house. She was saying "we" . . .

"Why are *you* here?" she asked automatically; not realising — to do her justice — the ungraciousness of her words, her tone.

And Vanessa thought: 'If she's going to be like this, I probably *shall* lose my temper.' Aloud, she said, with a quiet emphasis that penetrated: "I am here because someone *had* to take care of him. He was ill already — before you left."

In Edyth's eyes there dawned a more normal look, faintly tinged with hostility. "I — I was obliged to go."

Since Vanessa did not believe that statement, she simply disregarded it.

"When I came over that afternoon, I found him . . . on the verge of collapse. I . . . hasn't Dr. Norman told you?"

"He said . . . Ian had been nursed — devotedly. By you?"

"Yes — and Nurse Dawson. It's been . . . a terrible fight. Having typhoid on him so many days made matters worse. We did all we humanly could. This morning things looked much more hopeful . . . and then . . ."

To speak of those sacred moments was the last impossibility. The woman seemed benumbed all through.

"Really — I am most grateful —" she began — and her tone, though formal, sounded genuine. "All the trouble you've taken . . . it was most good of you —"

"*Good* of me!" Vanessa could endure no more. To be thanked — in that condescending fashion — for the privilege of nursing him! "It wasn't good of me. All I could do for him . . . was nothing . . ."

The face of Ian's wife — the uncomprehending antagonism of it — froze her to silence.

"Really, Mrs. Vane — I don't understand . . ." She drew herself up with a sigh of weary patience: and Vanessa instantly knew she did understand.

'She'll pretend. She'll force me — to say everything,' was her bitter thought: and the conviction roughened her voice as she answered: "I . . . it's not an easy thing to say. But I can't lie and shift, at a moment like this. I almost wish I could — for my own comfort . . . and yours. I want no thanks, Mrs. Challoner. The service . . . you shirked . . . was everything — to me. I cared . . . I *care* . . . and Ian —"

At that name on her lips, a faint colour crept into Edyth's cheeks.

"How you can stand there and *insult* me — like this . . . in the very first hour! As if it wasn't bad enough . . . ? You can't realise what you're saying. Your nerves . . . are upset with it all. Of course you would feel it. You were friends . . ."

"We were *more* than friends," Vanessa flung out desperately. It was a cruel truth to speak, with the anguish of loss fresh on them both; but pride would not let her seem to try and conceal what Mrs. Challoner had already guessed. "Don't blame *him*. We recognised, of course, the position . . . was impossible. I was going to leave Kashmir."

Edyth's faint colour ebbed. She could no longer pretend. But she remained half incredulous: convinced that the woman was exaggerating Ian's side of it. And yet . . . he had not seriously tried to stop her from going . . . ? In the face of that chaotic revelation, she almost forgot the terrible fact of her loss. With the odd instability of the superficially stable, she swerved, in a moment of time, from blank unbelief to a crazy suspicion too unworthy for utterance.

"I'm glad you had *that* much sense of decency," she said stiffly, all her possessive instinct up in arms. "How long has it been going on — this sort of thing?"

"*What* sort of thing?"

They faced each other at last; their mutual hostility no longer veiled.

"You — and Ian . . . pretending to be friends. Making love . . . behind my back. How far . . . ?"

"Great Heavens!" Vanessa flashed, in a white-hot fury. "Trust a good woman to suspect the worst on sight. You've been twenty years his wife. And you can imagine . . . *that* of him? I wouldn't believe it of him . . . if a dozen respectable people swore it on their Bibles. Think what you please of me. But have some respect for *him*."

Edyth, as usual, saw her error too late; and floundered in her attempt to mitigate it.

"It's not for you to dictate to me about my husband." She almost flung the word at Vanessa's head. "Of course, I know Ian's a good man. But with a woman like you, one never can tell. And — when he was alone . . ."

"Why did you *leave* him alone?" Vanessa parried swiftly. The insult to herself passed clean over her head. "Years and years of it. Is it so surprising that a close friendship formed — in such circumstances — should slip into . . . something stronger? Some men need companionship more than others. Did you ever discover, in all your years of marriage, that he was one of them — though he seemed so aloof and self-contained?"

She was saying things she had never dreamed of saying: nor could possibly have said in cold blood, at such a moment. But that base implication had loosed her tongue; and the rush of her pent-up bitterness would not be stayed.

"He spoke of it — only to-day. He was ready to give up anything — even India. And you — you would have accepted it all; never seeing . . . never troubling to understand . . . Oh, God, I'm glad — *glad* he's gone!" Her voice broke on that terrible confession. But she steadied herself and pressed on; determined to say all, while she had the situation in hand. "His heart and mind would have been starved always . . . with you. And if — if he had thrown up all for me, his conscience would have given him no peace . . ."

She broke off, half alarmed at her own temerity; and Edyth — who sat petrified under the storm she had raised — found her voice at last.

"I've never been spoken to like *that* . . . in all my life!"

The pettiness of it, after her own hurling of thunderbolts, was

so ludicrously in character, that Vanessa very nearly laughed outright. But laughter would have been a desecration. The discord of their quarrel was desecration enough.

"You may think you're very clever, holding forth like that," Edyth went on. "I think you're simply hysterical. Ian was a good man — you led him astray —" (nothing would shift that fixed idea). "You can talk as much as you please. You're *not* a good woman."

Vanessa felt annoyed with herself, because it hurt — that pin-prick, after the sword had passed through her soul. And she hit back unsparingly. "It's the good women of *your* type who *drive* men astray — who do more damage than all the bad ones put together . . ."

Light steps in the hall silenced her. Instinctively her hand went to her heart. Eve!

Next moment, the child was on her breast, clinging to her, crying convulsively.

"Oh, Vinessa — it isn't true — it *isn't* —" she sobbed.

"Darling — it is true," Vanessa told her; and at last the tears, that would not come, pricked her eyeballs, and rained unheeded on the child's hair. "Eve — here's Mummy arrived," she urged, feeling doubly a thief.

But Eve clung closer. "I don't *want* Mummy. She went away. She made Daddy ill, and now . . . he's died. I want Daddy — Daddy. *Let* me see him — please."

Edyth — with unsteady lips — murmured instinctively: "She'd better not. It would be a mistake."

And Vanessa, looking straight at her, over Eve's bowed head, answered quietly: "It would be the only wisdom. She'll craze herself otherwise, imagining . . . If you would take her — yourself?"

"No — no," Eve protested in a muffled voice. "*You* come. *Let* me see Daddy."

"Presently, darling — you shall." And, without looking at the still figure in the chair, she added: "It's quite unbalanced her, poor lamb."

Instinctively she knew that her own plain speaking had been as nothing to Eve's indictment.

"Is he — is he very dretful, because of . . . being dead?" the child asked, in an awed whisper.

"No, darling. He's very beautiful." She emphasised the words, letting them sink in. "Just resting. He was . . . *so* tired."

Suddenly she realised that Edyth Challoner had leaned forward, on the table strewn with Home papers, her face buried in her arms, her body shaken with uncontrolled weeping.

Eve's frank defection, and those few simple words, simply spoken, had melted the morsel of ice at her heart . . .

And all Vanessa's hardness melted also — seeing her thus.

"Eve, darling — listen," she said, putting the child gently away from her. "Be very brave and go to 'Sminny now. I'll come — afterwards. I *must* attend to poor Mummy."

It was the utmost she could say by way of appeal; and Eve — curiously obedient where she loved — choked down her tears. Then she looked across at her mother's bowed head and shoulders.

"I'm glad Mummy *is* sorry. You comfort her, Vinessa," she said in a softened voice — and went blindly back into the hall.

Vanessa went over and kneeled beside Ian's wife. "You poor — poor dear," she said, and laid an arm across those shaken shoulders. "It's too cruel. Won't you come — let me help you to bed?"

But Edyth cried on and on, unheeding. It was not only that she had lost Ian — in every way — and dimly knew the value of him too late, as such natures invariably do: it was also that she had seen herself clearly, for the first time, through the eyes of the woman he loved and the pitilessly clear eyes of her own child . . .

Later on, interminable hours later on — when the stir and fret had subsided, and the house was utterly still again — Vanessa sat once more in her accustomed chair by Ian's bedside.

As on that first night of vigil, so now — yet in how different a fashion! — she was lifted too far above human needs for any thought of sleep. That other, whose right it should have been to watch by him, lay only two rooms off, in a drugged stupor. Once

the floodgates were opened, it had seemed as if nothing could stay her abandoned, convulsive weeping.

Vanessa, broken and penitent, had been at her wits' end. Reluctantly she had roused Nurse Dawson: and the homely one — inured to grief in all its manifestations — had got poor Mrs. Chaloner to bed. With the help of a strong sedative, they had secured her a few merciful hours of oblivion.

For herself, Vanessa would permit no artificial oblivion to rob her of the privilege still so miraculously hers.

Upheld by a Strength beyond her own, she had come creditably through that more than difficult evening. She had seen Kaye broken with grief. She had seen Major Thorne and Thea . . . Then, she had crept into the child's room, hoping to find her asleep.

But Eve was not asleep. With a low cry, she sat bolt upright and flung out her arms. Drawing Vanessa down onto the bed beside her, she poured out her overcharged heart in a low torrent of words.

"Oh, Vinessa darling, keep me! Don't send me away with Mummy. I *can't* — I nearly hate her now. She made him die . . ."

"Darling — you *mustn't* say such things," Vanessa protested, amazed at the child's vehemence and perception. "Mummy had to go — because of Tony."

But Eve remained unimpressed. "I'm sure he wasn't half as bad as Daddy. Mummy's always mad over Tony. Besides — I know she made Daddy unhappy often. I've heard them." In the midst of her indictment, she had a glimmer of compunction. "Was I dretful, Vinessa? I was so . . . so . . . I somehow *couldn't* kiss her."

And Vanessa, understanding too well, said gently: "It *was* bad of you, Eve. Not kind, when she was so unhappy."

"D'you really think — she minded?"

"Yes — I do."

Eve sighed — and was silent a moment. Then in a tone of judicial calm, she announced: "Well, if it did make her feel sorry — about leaving Daddy, I think — it was rather a good thing." An

impermissible smile twitched Vanessa's lips. But Eve, in deadly earnest, hurried on: "I didn't mean it for being unkind, I just couldn't. It won't make *you* not keep me, will it? You'd be so lone. Daddy would hate you being lone. And I do love you so badly."

She clung with Ian's hands, she implored with Ian's eyes: and Vanessa unhesitatingly reassured her on that score.

"Of course, I'll keep you, darling — for now. You can't possibly go down in the heat. You and I and Larry will comfort each other."

"*And* poor Faizullah. I saw him crying. I spoke to him."

"Of course, Faizullah. He's been splendid. And when — when everything's over, we'll go and be somewhere quietly together — won't we?"

The child nestled closer. "Yes — yes — *far* away, and . . . forget everything."

"Daddy?"

Tears welled up and overflowed. "Oh, Vinessa! Of course I mean everything *except* — Daddy. *We* couldn't — never — could we?"

And while they clung together, there flashed the inspiration — Gangabal.

NOCTURNE

NOCTURNE

*Here, here's his place, where meteors shoot, clouds form,
Lightnings are loosened,
Stars come and go.*

BROWNING

It was early evening. The sun had slipped behind the northwestern peaks more than half an hour ago. There had been no 'visible music blasts,' no splendour of his going, as on that evening of radiant memory, more than a year ago.

Films of laminated cloud, pastel-soft, still held a lingering blush that faded from moment to moment. The ice-green waters of Gangabal lay still as glass. No ghostly breeze shivered over them. Every tint of the sky, every line of Haramokh and his companion heights was repeated in them, with that barely perceptible blur which makes the mirrored lovelier than the actual. It was as if one looked upon a double world; and such a world . . .!

On the rock where she had sat, that night, with Ian — not knowing, not dreaming how it was with him — Vanessa sat alone; Larry, an inseparable shadow, stretched at her feet.

Behind her, a little way along the shore, showed a dim cluster of tents and tethered ponies, and the friendly flicker of a campfire; its restless lights and shadows the only hint of movement in a region so incredibly still that the ear was aware of every indrawn breath.

In one of those tents, Eve lay asleep. They had come, as before, by the upland route. This last march had been a strenuous one for the child — partly walking, partly bestriding a wise little Kashmir pony. She had been splendid; new light in her eyes; new colour in her cheeks. But Vanessa had insisted on early bed.

This first night — Eve's welfare apart — she must, imperatively, be alone with her memories and Haramokh and Ian's voice, clear in her brain: "If the free spirit is ever drawn to linger round earthly haunts, I am quite sure mine would find its way back to Gangabal."

Had some secret part of him foreknown . . . this? Did his free spirit know, now, that she had come, as it were, at his bidding . . . ?

Yet, even in the act of coming, one half of her complex self could smile at the other half, could frankly recognise that sensible, everyday people, in whom fancy never fluttered a wing, would spurn her — if they guessed — for a highflown, sentimental fool. But they were incapable of guessing. And never in her life had she cared a jot for their spurnings, or their approvals.

Her heart and mind were keyed too high for mere sentiment to enter in. She did not rhapsodise, even to herself. She had simply obeyed an impetus there was no resisting. She had achieved her purpose, in the teeth of obvious difficulties. And now she was here, she knew that she would not have missed this one hour with him for all the frustrated years of her life . . .

Sitting there alone, while light ebbed from the sky and life from the hills, she looked back across the unreal vista of time that stretched between her gleam of inspiration and its inevitable fulfilment. Could it be only three weeks . . . ? To her, it seemed nearer three years.

For more than a week she had lain prostrate; every faculty numbed and blurred. For more than a week poor Mrs. Challoner had been quite unfit to travel again. They had met twice in a friendlier spirit than ever before. They had discussed, quite amicably, the thorny question of Eve; had decided that, in any case, she had better wait and travel with Thea, who was taking her small boy Home at the end of the year. Then Vanessa — having inserted the wedge — had ventured to speak of Ian's words to her, of the promise she had given him.

"If only you would let *me* . . . be responsible for Eve," she had tentatively urged, "I would bless you. I would take every care . . ."

And Edyth, with a sigh, had admitted, "I believe the child . . . would be happier with you. She has never seemed to care . . . like the others. And if her father expressed a wish — one ought to respect the wishes of the dead."

It was a convention that had often moved Vanessa to wonder,

‘Why more so than the wishes of the living — often so tragically set at nought?’ But, in the present case, she had felt too grateful to be critical.

The whole thing had been left rather tentative — undefined. That was Mrs. Challoner’s way. She would never admit that *she* had not cared to the full. It would all be laid on Eve. And she would hug the sad satisfaction of having dutifully obeyed Ian’s last wish . . .

But if Vanessa was clear-eyed, she was hostile no longer. All the flinty fragments of antagonism seemed to have been washed out of their hearts by that tempestuous flood of tears — whether these sprang from self-pity or sudden remorse. She shrewdly divined that Edyth Challoner was of those who never truly estimate the thing they value till it is taken from them. In the end she would probably love Ian dead better than Ian living; and would suffer accordingly, to the limit of her capacity. Eve’s presence would be a constant reminder of those terrible days — and eventually they would have the child’s own heart to reckon with. She had clearly felt insecure till her mother was gone.

But Mrs. Challoner, to the last, had been dominated by one idea. Her craving to get away from India, at once, seemed intensified by all she had suffered: a force stronger than herself. Even Dr. Norman had succumbed to it, against his better judgment: and the good Dawson, reënforced by Shere Ali, had escorted her to Bombay.

For Vanessa, the relief had been unspeakable. Then there had been her own lions to fight over the Gangabal trip; mercifully so, perhaps, since opposition roused and fired her always. Major Thorne had been the obstacle, of course. In the person of lover confessed, and Acting Resident of Kashmir, he would not hear of a woman and child marching up alone, even with Challoner’s most trusted *shikari* for escort. All her arguments had failed to move him.

Finally, it was Kaye and Chris who had come to her rescue. Early one morning — eight o’clock, to be precise — they had been married, by command of Chris — “almost imperceptibly.” Then, as man and wife, they had offered themselves for escort;

leaving Vanessa and Eve at Gangabal; pushing on strenuously to the top of Haramokh . . .

And here, at last, she sat alone, detached from them all, for one brief while — in these high and pure regions, where whispered intimations of “going on and still to be” seemed the voice of Reality — and earth the dream . . .

She sat on and on, till the blush faded and the sky darkened, and star after star pricked through, and the ghost of a three-quarter moon, above the crown of Haramokh, gradually took colour from the vanished sun — and her shrine was illumined with all the lights of heaven.

Deliberately she drew into herself the quiet of the night, the steadfastness of the scarred yet uncomplaining hills. And all the while eternal, unanswerable questions stirred restlessly in her brain: “Where is he now . . . ? What is he feeling . . . ? *Is he — at all . . . ?*”

To that last, her heart had but one answer: “Either he *is*, and he knows . . . or all this is a mocking, painted sham.”

Through everything, she had felt, in some indefinable fashion, that he was with her still. Her lifelong habit of inner sincerity made her chary of snatching at elusive consolations; but this, at least, she knew — that, in death, he was more intrinsically hers than he would ever have been had he lived. Not for one moment did she doubt the height and depth of his love for her. Yet, with full certainty — with mingled pain and pride — she knew that, even for her, he would never have left his wife and children while Edyth Challoner lived. There could never have been even the semblance of friendship any more. Now . . . he was at rest; out of it all; no longer harassed by inexorable necessities . . .

For herself, not one ounce of her sorrow would she willingly forego. To have loved him — and been loved again — was more than worth it all. Love, being creative in essence, cannot altogether fail of fruition. He had left her desolate, indeed; yet immeasurably enriched, in heart and mind — simply by being the man he was. The words she had spoken, for his comfort, were truer than she knew. She would never now be alone, as she had

been hitherto. The life she must take up again would be a life enlarged by human relations, closer and tenderer than any she had known since girlhood; Eve and Chris and Kaye, Faizullah, the faithful, and Larry, who never left her side . . .

As the earth darkened and the heavens lightened, she caught herself instinctively listening for the muffled thunder of an avalanche.

But no avalanche disturbed the unearthly stillness of that summer night . . .

THE END

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